Communication “Nuggets” for Dealing with Problematic People

(from a presentation at the National Association for Interpretation’s
2013 National Workshop in Reno, NV)

By Jon K. Hooper, Ph.D.
Verbal Victories Communication Consulting
Chico, CA

INTRODUCTION

Irritating visitors? Complaining staff members? Interpreters are often faced with such “problematic” people. This paper will cover several communication “nuggets” (tools and techniques) that interpreters can use to help deal with difficult communication situations.

“I have another meeting at 4pm.”

Situation: A person schedules an appointment or phone call to complain about a problem then goes on and on, taking up way too much of your time. Help!

Solution: Rich Weideman (an interpreter with the National Park Service) has a solution to such problematic people. He schedules a 15-minute call and no more. He does this up against a meeting or phone call that he has to attend. He tells the person this in advance via email or voice mail. He has found that giving the complainer this short window of time helps them come to the meat of the problem quickly. It also helps them realize that some time has to be included for Rich to respond.

Complication: What if the complainer runs out the clock? Then what?

Solution: Rich says he never goes over the time limit. He simply schedules another quick 10-minute follow-up call or meeting.

“How would you like to spend the last 15 minutes?”

Situation: Half way through a 30-minute appointment, the person with whom you are meeting starts telling stories that are off track yet you still have important issues to resolve. How can you better control the situation?

Solution: At the 15-minute mark, ask the person “How would you like to spend the last 15 minutes of our appointment?”

“Any other concerns?”

Situation: A complainer gripes about an issue such as the cost of a project and keeps repeating his complaint, although in a slightly different way each time. How can you stop this?

Solution: Say, “I heard your concern about the cost of the project. Do you have any other concerns?”

Complication: The complainer repeats the complaint once again.

Solution: “I’m hearing you. I understand that you are concerned about the cost of the job. If there aren’t any other
concerns, let me address this issue.”

**Change Shotgun Questions into Single Rifle Shots**

**Situation:** What can you do when a person “shotguns” you with 3 questions all at once and it’s hard trying to keep all 3 questions in your mind?

**Solution:** If you feel comfortable answering any of the questions, say, “I heard you ask 3 questions. Which one would you like to start with?”

**Complication:** You aren’t comfortable with one or more of the questions.

**Solution:** If you only feel comfortable answering question #2, say, “I heard you ask 3 questions. Let’s start with the second one.”

**Complaints and Cures**

**Situation:** Your employees come to you, complain, carry on and on, then exit without solving the problem. How can you steer complaints in a more constructive direction?

**Solution:** Say, “All employees are welcome to complain but only if the complaint is accompanied by potential cures. I think you might have a great solution that I might not have thought up.”

**Stop the Looping**

**Situation:** When you hold meetings with your staff, certain staff members always want to comment on, agree with, and confirm what others have said. When this behavior starts to loop on and on, it really wastes a lot of time. How can you prevent this?

**Solution:** When Bonnie Lippitt (an interpreter with the USFS) is facilitating a meeting and she sees the meeting headed in a looping direction, she says very clearly, “Does anyone have anything NEW to add to the conversation?” She says it really does register with folks and helps control the situation.

“**If you did know how to solve the problem…**”

**Situation:** Let’s presume you work with someone who isn’t very confident, so doesn’t tend to give their views on matters. When you ask them what the solution to a problem is that they are facing, they may say, “I don’t know.” In other words, they don’t seem to have the confidence to speak up even though you’d really like their opinion because they are a good thinker.

**Solution:** Say, “If you did know how to solve the problem, what solution would you come up with?” Then, be quiet. You’ll be amazed how often they give an answer. The “If you did know…” wording makes the situation more hypothetical and, thereby, reduces pressure on the person to come up with the “right” or “perfect” answer, so they are more willing to give their views on the matter.

“**Is this a good time to talk?”**

**Situation:** Sometimes when you call someone unexpectedly, they give short responses like they don’t seem to want to talk then get mad when you keep asking questions. How can you avoid this situation?
Solution: When you call someone unexpectedly, first ask them, “Is this a good time to talk?” After all, why start a conversation if they were just getting ready to leave their office for a date.

“Could you please resend?”

Situation: What should you do when someone doesn’t extend the basic courtesy of replying to your email?

Solution: Dr. Sam Ham (a professor emeritus of interpretation at the University of Idaho) has a solution. He suggests that you send a follow-up email saying the following: “I’m sure you replied to my recent email but, somehow, I’ve lost your reply. Could you please retransmit your reply?”

Reduce Phone Tag

Situation: You have a client who gets really ticked off when you keep playing phone tag. How can you reduce the chance of “phone tag” occurring when leaving a message?

Solution: When you leave a phone message, also leave several times and dates when you will be available for a conversation. Also, let the person know that if none of those times are convenient for them, that they should let you know good times and dates for them. Sarah Bevilacqua (an interpreter with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) says, “This works for me every time!”

“I can only imagine how you must feel!”

Situation: When someone tells you they are bummed about a situation and you faced the same bummer situation in the past, it’s common to say “I know exactly how you feel.” Why can this make the situation worse?

Solution: Some people may really object to such a statement. They may fire back by saying “How could you know how I feel? Your situation isn’t the same as mine. My situation is worse than anyone else’s situation.” So, rather than trying to immediately agree with the person, simply say “I can only imagine how you must feel.”

"Do you have a story or a question?"

Situation: You are presenting a program to some children. You ask them a question and a bunch of kids’ hands pop up. When you pick one child to answer the question, the child starts telling an unrelated story.

Solution: When presenting programs to younger children, Karen Haner, chief interpreter at Lassen Volcanic National Park, lets the kids know at the start of her presentation that she wants them to answer her questions but if they just have a story they want to share, the story will need to wait until the end of the program. So, when she sees a hand thrust into the air, she asks, "Do you have a story or an answer?"

Maintain Eye Contact with Sentence Hijackers

Situation: You have a colleague who tends to finish your sentences for you. How can you control this?

Solution: Such a person is called a “sentence hijacker.” Maintaining strong eye contact when you talk to the person may help. If they still end your sentence, hold your hand up, palm facing toward them giving a “halting” non-verbal cue.
Know your BATNA

**Situation:** You are trying to negotiate with a person who simply won’t bend. What can you do?

**Solution:** Know when to exit from a no-win situation. Fisher and Ury (2011) suggest that prior to entering a negotiation, you should know your BATNA, which is “Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement.” One such BATNA is to simply say, “I guess we won’t be able to reach an agreement. Thanks for your time.” Then, simply leave.

Phone Number at the Start

**Situation:** You have to leave a detailed message on the answering machine of a supplier who is really upset with you. What can you do when you leave your message to keep the supplier from getting further angered?

**Solution:** Give your phone number near the start of your recorded message (rather than at the end) so the recipient doesn’t get further angered having to replay the entire message if they didn’t get your phone number the first time through.

**Complication:** “OK, but what if I forget to do this?”

**Solution:** Gail Vanderstoep, a professor of interpretation at Michigan State University, suggests that you chunk your phone number. In other words, give your area code, then pause. Then give the second three numbers, then pause. Finally, give the last 4 numbers. This makes it easier for the recipient to write down your phone number.

“That sounded like a dig”

**Situation:** Some colleagues may act like a sniper. If you’re late to a job site and the “sniper” is surrounded by fellow workers, he’ll say “So here comes our latecomer who marches to the beat of a different drum.” Everyone laughs and you may feel embarrassed. How should you counter him?

**Solution:** Say “James, that sounded like a dig. Did you mean it that way?”

**Counter by James the “sniper”:** “Can’t you take a joke?”

**Solution:** Say, “James, you tell good jokes but that last line sounded like a dig as well.” The bottom line is that you will not let James get away with his rude comments. He’ll be much less likely to make such comments to you in the future.

Stop saying “To be perfectly honest”

**Situation:** You have a boss who is straight-laced and takes everything you say literally. Concerning a purchase that you boss thinks you should make, you say, “To be completely honest, boss, I’d rather wait to make the purchase.” Your boss responds, “So, you aren’t honest most of the time?”

**Your improved statement:** Instead of saying “To be completely honest…” say “The truth is…” or Simply delete the phrase “To be completely honest…” from the start of your sentence or start your sentence with “The truth is….”
Speak Up, Set Limits, and Say No

Situation: When one of your visitors gets mad at you, they cuss. You don’t want to continue the conversation if the cussing doesn’t stop. What can you do?

Solution: Use the “Speak Up, Set Limits, and Say No” system developed by Maria Arapakis (1990). Say, “I want to listen to you but the swearing needs to stop. It’s no big deal up to now, but if you keep using such strong words, I’ll have to end the conversation.”

Helping Oblivious People

Situation: Your boss has a habit that intimidates employees and shuts them down. For example, s/he often says to employees, “That’s a lame idea.” Is there any way of letting your boss learn the impact of his/her behavior?


1. Make an appointment with the person.
2. State your ambivalence. Tell your boss that you’re concerned about how they’ll react to what you have to say. For example, say, “On one hand, I’m not really looking forward to this conversation because I’m a bit concerned about how you may react to what I’m have to say. However, the issue is really important.”
3. State an assumption. Tell your boss, “I’m not sure you are aware of how one of your behaviors is affecting me and other people in the company.”
4. Tell your boss what it is they’re doing and how it affects you or other people. Do so matter of factly, not in a blaming fashion. The idea isn’t to make them feel bad. You could say, “When you tell someone their idea is lame, it tends to put the individual on the spot and shut down any input from other innovators in the room.”
5. Expect a reaction of surprise and to get dumped on. Then repeat your concern. Your boss may say, “Are you kidding? I never quell new ideas. Where did you get such a stupid idea?” Once your boss shuts up, repeat yourself. You could say, “When you use a strong word like lame, it tends to make people afraid to speak up because they’re afraid they’ll get into an argument with you.
6. Offer help. You could say, “Would it help if the next time you use the word lame in a meeting if I held my fist tight as a signal that people are shutting down?”

I Rate with Irates

Situation: You’re faced with an irate customer who won’t stop belittling you and your company?

Solution: A book called “Feeling Good” by David Burns (1999) outlines a great approach for dealing with irate people, as follows:

Step 1. Thank the person for their comments.

Step 2. Acknowledge that points they brought up are important.

Step 3. Acknowledge the need for more information concerning the issue.

Step 4. Invite the critic to do something about the issue and provide the person with a "means of action."
For example, give them the name and phone number of a “higher authority” who could help them.

The “Escalator Approach”

**Situation:** What should you do? While leading a guided tour of your site, two people in your group start talking to one another making it hard for other people to hear your tour information. Should you politely ask them to be quiet? Should you let them know their talking is bothering other visitors?

**Solution:** We can learn how to handle such a situation by remembering how repairmen approach their work. Given that repairmen never know exactly what problems they’ll face at a job site, they carry a variety of tools in their toolboxes. They may have a small, 6-inch-long adjustable wrench for tightening a nut on a ¼-inch-wide bolt yet also have a huge, 24-inch-long adjustable wrench for tightening a nut on a 2-inch-wide bolt. They wouldn’t initially use the 24-inch-long wrench to tighten the ¼-inch-wide bolt’s nut because the huge wrench is cumbersome and the leverage it generates might crack the nut or break the bolt. However, if use of the small wrench wasn’t generating enough leverage, the repairman would “escalate” to a bigger wrench.

Interpreters should use the same approach when dealing with problematic people by having a lot of tools in their communication tool kits and by initially using the simplest-to-implement and potentially least “damaging” (least confrontational) communication tool. Let’s call this the “escalator approach” because you don’t step up to get onto an escalator, you simply step forward (almost all escalators have two to three flat steps before the steps start rising). The analogy is that you should try the easiest approach for solving the conflict before “escalating” to a more involved approach. To do this, however, you must first “build” the escalator so you know potential “steps” (communication tools) available to you.

Let’s go back to our guided tour. Asking the talkers to be quiet or telling them their chatter is bothering other visitors are strategies “too high on the escalator.” There are other strategies that should be tried first that might solve the problem without directly confronting anyone, as follows:

- Pan your head in their direction and talk toward them for a moment
- Keep talking in their direction without panning your head away from them (to keep the focus on them)
- Stop talking for a moment (the resulting silence may let the talkers realize how loud their chatter is)
- Raise your voice volume
- Step closer to them while continuing with your normal tour information

If the techniques above don’t stop the talking, there are several ways of confronting the group as a whole without singling out the talkers, as follows:

- Ask the group, “Can everyone hear me OK?”
- Ask people next to the talkers, “Can you hear me OK?”
- Focus the group’s attention by saying, “Can I have everyone’s attention? I have some special information to share”
- Remind the entire group of your ground rules about disruptive side discussions

Finally, there are a variety of ways of confronting the talkers, as follows:

- Politely ask the talkers (in front of the whole group) if they have a question about a tour topic
- While walking to the next stop, discretely ask the talkers if they have a question about the tour
- While walking to the next stop, discretely let the talkers know that their talking is disrupting others
• While walking to the next stop, discretely tell the talkers that while it’s no big deal up until now, if they don’t stop talking, they’ll be asked to leave (this is the “Speak Up, Set Limits, and Say No” approach by Maria Arapakis, 1990)

• Let the entire group know your BATNA or “Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement” (Fisher and Ury 2011): Tell the entire group that if disruptive side discussions don’t stop, the tour will end (the hope here is that other group members will put pressure on the talkers)

The key to using the “escalator approach” is for the interpreter to identify available options prior to a difficult communication encounter.

REFERENCES


