
UNIT 5: Using Telephone at the Workplace

Structure

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5.1 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- ... State the role of a telephone in communication;
- ... Use basic telephone skills for communication;
- ... Employ effective listening skills to understand well;
- ... Mention the 'do's and 'don'ts' while speaking over the telephone;
- ... List the things that good telephone etiquette requires;
- ... Describe the benefits of good telephone skills at work; and
- ... Explain how good telephone skills can benefit a company.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

The telephone has become an indispensable part of our lives. We remain in touch with our friends and near ones using the telephone. We have access to so many services, be it plumbing, servicing and repair of machines, electrical work, pest control, food to order, home delivery of groceries or our cable and Internet services, through this small machine called the telephone.

We also use the telephone for cold calling, contacting referrals, answering advertisements, making enquiries, following up on interviews, and sometimes even conducting or facing the interview itself. And the whole world of business runs on the telephone. In short, we cannot exist without the telephone in today's world.

This telephone sits quietly on our desk but is a source of flow of immense information and allows communication with the outside world. Knowing how to use it is important because this little machine 'can dominate you unless you tame it'! To use your telephone effectively, you need to **manage** its use. Knowing how to use a tool effectively keeps you from making mistakes. This is true for those whose job is intrinsically linked with the telephone –like the front office assistants, telephone operators, secretaries, customer service agents and BPO employees, in these jobs mistakes on the job can be fatal!

It is true that effective telephone communication skills are something that not every employee brings with them when they join an organization. Then there is

the problem of people having different standards of what constitutes effective telephone communication. So it is important to learn some standard procedures.

‘In a customer service orientated business, these telephone skills are essential to your customer’s perception of your organization and their loyalty to it. A failure to emphasize the importance of effective phone communication among your telephone customer service representatives can bring into question your organization’s professionalism and credibility, possibly sending customers to your competition.’ (From the Internet)

The above quotation clearly says that things can be made or marred depending upon what kind of telephonic communication it was: effective or faulty.

We also need to understand what communication is. The objective of communication is to send your message across to the listener just as you want it. We do not want the listener to understand it otherwise. That is why we choose appropriate words to clothe our ideas in and choose only those words which cannot be interpreted in different ways. Our message should be related to the context and the situation. We all know that the meaning of an utterance lies less in the words and more in the non-verbal communication. We shall read about these later in the unit. Then there are barriers to communication which can vary from outside noise, faulty machine to feelings, emotions and pre-determined notions and biases. And since we do not have body language to help the listener get our real meaning we have to be careful with our words and non-verbal communication.

So, what constitutes effective telephone communication and how do we use it effectively? Let us begin with the basic telephone skills i.e. managing the use of the telephone.

5.3 READING COMPREHENSION: BASIC TELEPHONE SKILLS

Once you are using the telephone you need to develop some procedures that ensure you get the most out of each call and that you do not waste time.

Your job may be largely receiving and making telephone calls but there are other things that you do as well. You need to manage your time in such a way that your schedule does not get disrupted and you can accomplish your jobs for the day. So the first thing you would need to do is to schedule your calls.

Scheduling and managing calls

Schedule your outward calls to suit your work schedule and that of the receiver/respondent. So there would be some time allocated for outward calls that you need to make. Similarly if you have a lot of office work to do, you can filter the calls so that only the most important ones get through to you. This way you would not be interrupted in your work. You can check on the other calls and call them back at a time when you are freer.

Planning outgoing calls

At the beginning of each day do the following:

... make a list of all the calls you have to make

- ... arrange them in order of priority (essential, desirable, those that can be rescheduled, if necessary)
- ... allocate time for each call trying, if possible, bunch the outward calls according to the time it would be suitable for your respondent.

In this way you might make some calls early in the day, some after lunch and perhaps a few in the evening depending upon the convenience of your respondent and yours too.

Receiving Incoming calls

For incoming calls, decide when you are able to take calls without having the flow of your other work interrupted. You may put a suitable message on your answering phone or any other answering service you use. By scheduling your calls in this way, you will be able to give your full attention to them.

Being prepared for the telephone call

Being prepared to take a phone call is necessary as it ensures that you start out on the right track. Jot down your notes which might contain some or all of the information given below:

- ... the name of the person you are calling/or expecting a call from
- ... your relationship to them (perhaps a referral)
- ... the purpose of your call
- ... the main points you need to discuss
- ... anticipate a few things he/she might ask

Your notes will keep you on track and minimize the chance of forgetting some important information.

Identifying yourself

Identify yourself immediately when you make the call. Never assume the person will remember who you are so remind them how you know them. Refer to your previous conversation or any written communication between the respondent and your company. This way your call will be specific and no time will be wasted.

Below are a few examples of identifying:

- a) A: Hello, ABN Company. How may I help you?
B: This is Arvind Sharma, applicant for the post of deputy manager. I wished to enquire about....
- b) A: Hello.
B: This is Mrs. Kumar speaking. I had called yesterday to enquire about the motor insurance....
A: Yes, Ma'am, I remember you had called. Is there anything you wished to ask/know?
- c) A: Good morning. Sarah Training Institute.

B: Mr. Rao, from National Fashion Centre here....

Rescheduling an untimely call

It is important to find out if this is a good time to call. If not, schedule a better time and try to get a direct line or extension to avoid the telephone operator. The respondent will be in a better position to take your call and you will notice that the call will be more fruitful and positive.

Eliminating distractions

Turn off the radio, television or anything else that can distract you. Request your colleagues to lower their voices as they talk. Or if possible, call from a quiet location and avoid using a cellular telephone. You may get a lot of extraneous noise and you might be cut off in the middle of a conversation. Try not to do two things at the same time as you may have to ask the respondent to repeat himself/herself.

Using appropriate greetings and endings

Whether you are making a call or receiving one, use a suitable greeting. Appropriate greetings and endings to calls help build a good rapport and avoid misunderstandings and wasting time. The four elements of an appropriate greeting are:

- ... thanking the respondent for calling your company
- ... identifying your company
- ... giving your name and job title/department
- ... asking how you can help the caller

When you close the call you should:

- ... make sure that the caller has no more queries
- ... thank the caller
- ... let the caller put the receiver down first, so they don't feel you have cut them off.

A word of caution! Do not appear too familiar in your approach.

Greetings

- a) Thank you for calling Ambika Mills. How may I help you?
- b) Good morning. This is Suniti Pillai, Public Relations officer, Ambika Mills. How can I assist you?
- c) Good afternoon. Hotel Park Inn. (wait for response)

Endings

- a) A: Is there anything else you wished to ask?

B: No. Thank you.

A: Thank you for calling Grant High. Have a good day,

Sir.(wait for caller to put receiver down)

b) A: Is there any other way I can be of assistance, Ma'am?

B: Umm, yes. Could you tell me in whose name shall make the draft?

A: In the name of Rattan Incorporates, Ma'am.

B: Thanks a lot. Good day to you.

A: It's a pleasure. Good day.

Gathering Information

As we have said earlier telephone communication is vital to business because it allows both customers and employees to gather information or solve problems quickly. That makes a telephone call a purposeful activity. This means the caller has some definite objective or reason to call. You will need to elicit this objective as quickly and as clearly as possible. If you are making the call you would need to state your reason for the call as soon as you have identified yourself.

In a simple information-seeking call, all you need to do is ask for the caller's name, address, telephone and fax numbers.

However, in more complex situations, you need to develop your questioning techniques so that you can elicit the main facts. In such situations you would need to be friendly and helpful. Your caller may have a complaint about a product or service.

In such case you would need to:

- ... ascertain the nature of the problem
- ... verify (asking model number, name etc.) that the product in question is a product of your company
- ... next check on the date of purchase to find out if the warranty cover still applies
- ... through questions try to find out how the caller has been using the product
- ... and what steps they have taken to rectify the problem

Read the examples below.

a) A: Good morning. Abha Electronics.

B: Good morning. There is a problem with the new refrigerator I bought from you last Sunday.

A: What exactly is the problem, Sir?

B: There is no chill tray to keep milk or other perishables.

A: Could you tell me the model number, Sir?

B: It is Coolpool, 450, Energy saver.

A: (Repeats to show that she has got the correct information) Coolpool, 450, Energy Saver?

B: That's right.

A: Please be on the line. I shall check and let you know.

A: (after a minute) Thank you for being on the line. Sir, this particular model does not come with an inbuilt chill tray. But if you wish to have one, you could purchase it from us. Please call number and our representative will come home and deliver it to you.

B: How much would it cost?

A: Rs.500/-, only for the chill tray. We have no service charges for this.

B: Thank you

b) A: Good afternoon. Apex computers.

B: Good afternoon. I needed some help with my computer.

A: Which company are you calling from, Ma'am?

B: Abha Photos and Graphics. We're your regular customers.

A: Thank you for the information. What exactly is the problem?

B: You see I loaded the latest version of some software. It took some time to install but after that my computer does not seem to work well.

A: Did you restart the computer after installing the new software?

B: No, in fact I continued working. Should I try to restart?

A: Yes, please do. And if the problem persists you can give us a call.

B: Thank you. You have been very helpful.

A: It's a pleasure, Ma'am.

In other cases you would need to ascertain:

- ... who is calling
- ... from where (company or individual)
- ... reason for calling
- ... the nature of the problem or query

Suggesting and verifying a course of action

Once you have an accurate picture of the situation, you are in a position to propose a course of action to your caller. In many instances if it is a minor problem it can be rectified by giving a few instructions to the caller as in computers or other machines. In other cases you might like to suggest

the plan of action.

You should:

- ... outline the proposal and make sure that it is acceptable to the caller
- ... confirm that they understand what is to be done

Here is an example of a call where active listening skills are used and a course of action is agreed:

A: Good morning. Thank you for calling Worldvision. How may I help you?

B: Good morning, I'm Sheila Sahni speaking from flat number 425. My Internet is not working.

A: Not working, Ma'am? Can you open the home page?

B: No, I cannot.

A: What does it say?

B: It says 'website not found'.

A: Ma'am, would you restart your computer once?

B: All right. Please be on the line.

(After a couple of minutes)

B: I have done that. Now what do I do?

A: Please go to start button and press 'Run'. A black window will open and some message will come on it. Let me know the message that comes.

B: Well, it says 'No reply from host' or something like that.

A: Oh, then there is a problem with the network or the cable. A technician will come and check it out. Would you be home today?

B: Please send one now. I need to use the Internet urgently.

A: Sure, Ma'am, a technician will be at your place within ten minutes.

B: Thank you very much.

Taking notes

Take notes of the information gained and repeat it back to the caller to make sure that you have understood correctly. You might like to record the name of the caller, time of call, for what reason, the action you agreed upon or action taken at your end, details of address, telephone number and the complaint number if you have allotted one.

Dealing with difficult callers

There may an occasion when the caller is angry and difficult because he or she has a complaint. You would need to handle the call tactfully for the image of your company depends upon how you deal with the problem. It is important to treat the caller with respect for he or she may be a potential client. Your tactful handling may help in getting business for your company whether it is sales, getting a new subscriber, a new student if yours is an educational institution, or even a new collaborator in business.

Whatever the nature of the problem, attend to it without disclaiming personal responsibility and promise to take positive action. You might refer the caller to the concerned department or your boss or you could assure that the job would be done within a reasonable time.

Here is an example.

A: Saviour General Insurance. How may I help you?

B: Can I talk to someone senior in the company? You have sent me the Motor Insurance policy with the same mistakes in it.(Sounds angry)

A: I'm sorry for the inconvenience you've faced Ma'am. Please be on the line. I shall connect you to the concerned person.

B: No, I don't want to talk to any executive. I want to talk to someone senior. How many times do I have tell you that my car is not hypothecated to any bank? Yet your revised policy says 'Hypothecated to ABC Bank'.

A: I'm extremely sorry for the inconvenience you have faced. I shall put you through to our deputy manager here.

B: Thank you

In brief you would be doing all or most of the things mentioned below.

- ... listen without interrupting
- ... gather the facts and make a note of them
- ... take their details so you can get back to them
- ... sympathize with them and offer to act as fast as you can
- ... apologize if you have made the mistake
- ... stay calm even though the caller is angry and uses abusive language

At the end remember to give the details of the department you have forwarded the call to and assure that the concerned person will get back within a stipulated time.

Other Strategies for Effective Phone Communication

- ... Return calls in a timely fashion; failure to do so reflects poor customer service. As a caller, be sure to leave voicemails that are clear and informative. Leave your name, business, reason for your call and contact information.
- ... Put the customer on hold only if it is absolutely necessary. No one likes to be left on hold indefinitely. If you must put a customer on hold, estimate the time of the wait and ask whether he or she would mind holding. If you do have a caller on hold, check in with the

caller every 45 to 60 seconds. 'A minute is a lifetime when you are on hold.'

... Never let a phone ring more than three times. Attend to it promptly. Doing so tells callers that their call is important to you.

These are some of the brass-tacks of telephone communication at office. You will learn more about these in the sections that follow.

Check your progress 1

- 1 How can one be prepared for the telephone call?
- 2 What is the relevant information one needs to gather from a telephone conversation? Illustrate your answer with examples.
- 3 What strategy should be employed while dealing with difficult callers?
- 4 How can one give the impression of an efficient helpful office staff?
- 5 Read the statements given below and say whether they are true or false.
 - i We need to be very careful with our choice of words and utterances so that the specific meaning is conveyed.
 - ii Jotting down notes and keeping them ready at one's table helps in keeping record for future communication.
 - iii We should use appropriate language for greeting and signing off.
 - iv It is nice to do some social talk before coming to business as it helps to build rapport with the customer.
 - v It is important to get an accurate picture through questions because many a time the problem is minor which can be fixed through telephonic instructions alone.
 - vi Instead to returning calls we must wait for the customer to call again. This way we will know that the customer is serious.

5.4 EFFECTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

A fruitful and positive interaction over the telephone depends much on our listening skills. And we need to remember that we do not have the advantages of a face-to-face interaction where we can use clues like facial expression, object on hand, the location or the gestures of the interlocutor. We have to depend totally upon our listening skills.

According to Mia Schiffman Melanson of the Help Desk Institute, words alone do not convey the meaning of what a person is saying. In a face-to-face communication the aspects that help to get the message across are largely non-verbal. If the meaning of a message comes through the non-verbal communication, we are at a disadvantage in a telephonic conversation. As is evident from this table, we would have to glean the meaning mostly from the tone of voice of the respondent in a telephone talk.

The avenues of verbal communication	Percentage of emphasis in face-to face communication	Percentage of emphasis on telephone
Body language, gestures, facial expression	55%	0%
Tone of voice	38%	85%

Word content	7%	15%
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What is good listening?

Good listening skills mean allowing the respondent to talk and to convey that we are interested in what he/she is saying and indicate our attention with a few encouraging sounds or a few relevant questions or by interrupting in an encouraging manner. These interruptions could be 'yes', 'I see', 'Okay', 'right,' 'I know what you mean', or they could be prompts to encourage the caller to say more: 'Is that true?', 'Are you sure, etc. In this way we get the right information, notice the drift of the conversation, anticipate what the caller may say or ask next, stay on track and best of all win the trust of the caller. This kind of listening is called **activelistingening**.

Three important components of verbal communication are:

- ... rate of speech
- ... tone or attitude
- ... word choice

The real message often comes through subtle clues which we might miss if we are not paying attention.

One way to remember how to listen actively is to remember these points.

- L Let others speak.
- I Intend to "hear" what they are saying.
- S Speak when it is your turn.
- T Talk with them, not at them.
- E Enthusiastically respond when appropriate.
- N Never speak when else is talking.

Barriers to oral communication

Listening carefully in an office humming with activity can be a challenge. We must be aware of these and avoid them. If we get distracted we might miss on some important information and would have to ask the respondent to repeat himself/herself which is not a good practice. A few of the things that may distract our attention while we are attending to a call are discussed below.

Environmental distractions

In a busy office, physical activity and movement around can distract you. There may be a colleague who puts something on your table or wants you to see something at that very moment, there may be other telephones ringing or lights flashing which may distract your attention. We need to focus and not allow these to distract our attention from what our respondent is saying over the telephone.

Jumping Ahead

Many times we are so preoccupied with what we are going to say next that we miss what the respondent is saying. This is called jumping ahead. This happens when we are under pressure to solve a problem quickly. It is also true

that we listen at a faster speed than when we speak.

Emotional filters

Often we begin our work with pre-conceived notions which are primarily based on our previous experiences. If we have had an unpleasant encounter with a particular person we tend to be defensive or even aggressive. We respond to the situation emotionally and this affects the conversation. When we develop a negative attitude towards a person, even a suggestion appears to be an accusation or fault-finding. We must be wary of such emotional filters because they do not allow us to perceive the correct message. Our emotional response often distorts the meaning of what the person is saying. This can unfairly influence the transaction.

Mental side-trips

Taking repeated calls of a similar nature can be boring. You know what you would ask or say and how the conversation will proceed and soon boredom and indifference creeps in. You mentally start switching off the call on hand and begin to take mental trips about what you would do in the evening, or a visit you need to make or simply what you are going to order for lunch from the canteen. When you re-engage yourself in the conversation you find that you have not lost much as the answers were anticipated. You drift away again and this time you lose your respondent. You have to ask the respondent to repeat what he or she said.

Effective Listening: Some Tips

In order to listen effectively we would need to do the following:

- ... First and foremost- pay attention
- ... Let the respondent know that the call is important to you as well
- ... Pay attention to the ideas (what the person is really saying)
- ... Take down relevant information/queries
- ... Assess the emotional state of the respondent
- ... Read between the lines (the actual purpose of calling)
- ... Assess how much the respondent knows

Paying Attention and taking down notes

We have discussed distracters and the need to pay attention. If we pay attention, we can get not only the spoken messages but the unspoken messages as well. That will help us to provide the required information or make the respondent feel comfortable and reassured. As we listen, we should take notes so that we do not have to ask him/her to repeat what he/she said a while ago.

Paying attention to the ideas

We all have speech idiosyncrasies. Some speak fast, some speak a bit too slow, some have speech mannerisms like using expressions like 'You see' '...and the kind' etc. which they use frequently. Some have a heavy accent. Some use too many words to say a thing. Some have voices that may distract-either too shrill or too melodious. All of these may distract our attention from the content of what the person is saying. We need to be focused and in order to do so try to keep

notes. This will keep our mind on the ideas and the theme of the conversation and not speech mannerisms.

Assess the emotional state of the speaker

When a person calls up, he or she may be calm, aggressive, angry, frustrated, disappointed, happy, sarcastic or plain offensive. The tone of the voice, the pauses, the additional sounds like sighs, giggles or laughter tell us about the mood of the speaker at the time of speaking. In addition, the choice of words too indicate, what the person wants to convey. At times people speak very fast when they are agitated. We need to understand the state of mind and act accordingly. In case a person is too agitated, it is a good idea to suggest that we talk at a later time when he or she is in a better mood. We also need to reassure that their job would be done, and even if something is impossible, we can use a soothing voice and an empathetic manner to provide comfort. This will make the person trust and come back to you.

Assess what the speaker knows

We need to assess how much the person knows about the subject on hand by listening to his/her choice of words and her enquiries. If we discover that a person does not know much about the subject then it would be advisable to avoid jargon and taking facts for granted. We would need to explain a few things and use the layperson's language to convey the information to him/her. In such a case we ought not to use abbreviations and short forms with which the speaker is not acquainted.

Read between the lines

Often many things are meant but left unsaid. We need to look for hints in the shape of questions like 'There is no way I can get it before Monday?' or tone of voice that indicate what the person really wants. If we can provide any sort of help, say to person who needs something immediately, we can try to do so. If there are some unspoken requests like, "You see I live very far and have a very young child," means that the person will not be able to come and collect something personally. Offer possible options permitted in your office that could make it easy for him/her.

You may be able to glean the actual purpose of calling from the clues in the voice or the words. If a person made enquiries like, "Has the meeting of Executive Committee been held?" and you knew that he/she had put in a proposal, you would know that she/he wishes to know the status of his/her proposal. In that case you might give her the relevant information within the scope of your post.

Thus we have seen that when we actively pay attention not only to words but other non-verbal cues like tone of voice, pauses, hesitation etc. to understand what the respondent actually means.

A few things to avoid

Do not interrupt

We must allow the respondent to speak. It is not polite to cut someone off mid-sentence. Moreover, if we listen to the respondent we would understand the need, the problem or what the person is trying to say. We must be careful

while talking to an angry respondent. Interruption would make him/her more irritated. It is best to let him/her say what he/she wants. Perhaps after he/she has let off steam, she would be more amiable to what you say.

Do not finish the respondents' sentences for them

We might be in a hurry to get to the root of the problem and with our years of experience we might anticipate what the person will say next. It is not wise to do so since if you are proved wrong then it would be embarrassing for you. Even if you right you might appear to be patronizing and the respondent will feel belittled. Either way it will affect you and your company's image.

Read the conversation below.

A: Good morning, is it the ABC Institute?
B: Yes, Ma'am, this is the ABC Institute. What can I do for you?
A: You see, I applied for the post of Secretary at this institute last week.
B: Oh, I see Ma'am. **They have not yet decided the date for the interview.**
(assumption)
A: No, I did not call to find out the date of the interview. By mistake I had submitted my original certificate with the application.
B: So what do you want me to do, ma'am?
A: You see I have another offer. I need to submit the certificate there. And I would like to withdraw my application from here. *(fact)* When can I come to collect it?
B: The applications are still under screening. Would you give me a call at 4 in the evening to find out?
A: Sure, thanks.

We can thus conclude that much of telephone communication is more to listen and less to speak. The listening too has to be active and sharp. For that we need to pay attention and often take down notes to be aware of the thread of the conversation.

Check your progress 2

1 What are the barriers to communication?

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.....
.....
.....

1 How can one listen effectively?

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.....
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3 What do you understand by listening between the lines?

4 Listening like reading is a predictive exercise where we constantly predict what the speaker might say next or what will come next in the

text. However, during official communication we must not try to complete the sentences for the customer. Can you explain why?

- 5 Why is telephone communication more of listening and less of speaking? Explain.

Listen to the telephonic conversation and answer the questions that follow.

Check your progress 3

- 1 Where did Goonj Gandhi call?
- 2 What did he want to do?
- 3 Why was it necessary for the customer care executive to know his card number?
- 4 Which department was his call transferred to?
- 5 Why did the executive in the Credit Card department take so many details from Goonj Gandhi?
- 6 Were the executives precise and to the point in their communication?
- 7 Were they courteous?
- 8 Which sentence shows that Goonj Gandhi was anxious?
- 9 Which sentence must have put his mind at rest?
- 10 Would you rate this conversation as a piece of effective communication? Why/Why not?

5.5 EFFECTIVE SPEAKING SKILLS

The image of the company, institute or office is created by the way we handle the calls. It is important to project the best possible image of our organization with the help of our voice, tone, choice of words, willingness to listen and willingness to help.

The Three Components of Verbal Communication

Let us look at the three components of verbal communication: rate of speech, tone and choice of words.

Rate of speech

People's speed of delivery of speech differs. The normal speed of delivery amongst the English speaking people is between 125 to 150 words per minute. There may be fast speakers who create a barrage of words and sentences. It does not matter so much as it is possible to understand even when a person speaks at 300 words per minute. Faster than this is the speed at which we think-almost 500 words per minute. This means that a person with a fairly slow speed of delivery can make us restless and we end up finishing the sentences for him/her in an attempt to bring the conversation to a close. This also means that we indirectly influence what the respondent would say.

Another interesting fact is that the speed of delivery is related to the emotional state of a person. An impatient, excited or angry person would speak at a faster pace. On the other hand slow speed of delivery might mean confusion or fatigue. Though the speed of delivery can give us some insight into the mental

state of the speaker the indicators may not always be correct.

Tone

Tone is the intonation pattern and voice modulation of the speaker. The tone can be simply neutral. It can be contemptuous, sarcastic, aggressive, condescending, helpful, friendly or simply indifferent. With good listening skills we can make out what the person actually means. The tone tells us about their attitude towards us.

Say for example if a person says ‘What a great company this is!’ or ‘How fortunate I am to get a call from you!’ these could mean that the person is indeed happy or it could have been said in sarcasm or even jest. We need to listen closely to understand the emotion behind an utterance. A sigh might mean frustration, laughter might mean that the respondent is intimidated or simply embarrassed. In either case we need our respondent to feel comfortable and begin to trust us.

Similarly we must be careful about our tone. Nowhere should the respondent feel that we do not care or our attitude is not right. On the one hand the respondent needs a problem solved or a certain information provided. He/she has emotional needs on the other. We need to address both kinds of needs for a lasting relationship with a customer or user of our services.

Choice of Words

The choice of words of a respondent can also give an insight into his or her state of knowledge, attitude, general behaviour and purpose of calling. A person who uses a lot of technical words is either trying to browbeat by showing that he/she knows a lot about the topic or simply trying to impress you into compliance. A person who is hesitant and uses few technical words means the person does not have much knowledge of the field. The choice of words like ‘you’ or ‘me’ might be an indication that the respondent looks upon us as an adversary.

Our attitude comes through our tone and choice of words and if it is a positive one we have won a customer or a client. But if the attitude is not right we might lose the customer or the contact. Our behaviour dictates to a large extent the attitude that comes through.

Let us consider the different kinds of attitudes that may come through our behaviour and the one that is most desirable.

Passive attitude

Passive communication style is characterized by expressing constant agreement of what the other is saying. Passive people allow others to dominate them. They do not protest even when it is required and as a result suffer from over work, domination and suppression. It is important to stand up for one’s rights and over the telephone, we might need to do that-stand up for our rights and for those of the organization. It is good to be assertive and call a spade a spade if it is necessary. If we remain passive in the office, we are sure to be trodden upon by others or get saddled with too much work. This will have an undesirable outcome often leading to sudden explosion of anger and aggressive behaviour.

Aggressive attitude

Aggressive people are always on the defensive looking for a way to blame others. Aggressive language undermines and humiliates others. Certainly we do not want our clients, customers or our contacts to feel that. The choice of words as shown above, the tone of our voice, the volume of our voice indicate our aggressive attitude. This causes situations to get more complicated. So, we must not consider the caller as an adversary who has to be defeated. We must not overuse our personal power.

Assertive attitude

We need to find a mean between the two kinds of attitude. On the one hand, we do not want to be cowed down by simply what the respondent is saying and we do not want to trample over the rights of others. The mid-path would be to be confident, convincing and assertive. Assertive people are direct, positive and participatory. They do not talk to the client, they talk with the client appreciating both points of view. They respect the rights of others. But they are ready to stand up for their rights and call a spade a spade if the need arises.

Assertive behavior is goal-oriented or result-oriented and not blame-oriented. They are pleasant to talk to as they can appreciate the good points in others as much as they are aware of their own good points.

Hence, if we are assertive we would respect and care for our clients and rapport building would be quick. It is important for the person on the other end to feel valued and reassured that the problem would be solved or their requests would be addressed.

In such a situation both the respondents participate trying to find a solution together and the result is a good solution.

Let us consider the situation we discussed above.

A: Good morning, is it the ABC Institute?
B: Yes, Ma'am, this is the ABC Institute. What can I do for you?
A: My name is Shaheeda Parveen. You see, I applied for the post of Lecturer at this institute last week. By mistake I have submitted my original post graduate certificate with the application.
B: So what do you want me to do, Ms. Parveen?
A: I would like to replace it with a photocopy.
B: I guess that would be possible as the applications are still under screening. You can give us the photocopy and we shall return you the original. Would you be able to come at 12.30 p.m. on Friday?
A: Friday? (hesitates) You see I live very far and our baby sitter is on leave.
B: Umm. Ma'am, could you courier the photocopy to us. Please give your full address so that we can courier your original certificate back to you, if that is fine with you.
A: I think that is a good idea. Could you send it by courier tomorrow?
B: I'm sorry that would not be possible before Friday. The earliest you can get it is on Saturday afternoon.
A: Al..right... I hope the certificate would be safe.
B: Don't worry. They are the best courier service.
A: What is your name, please?
B: I am Anil. Anil Sobti.
A: Thank you so much, Mr. Sobti.
B: It's a pleasure, Ma'am.

We noticed that Anil Sobti was positive and could read the unsaid request when Shaheeda Parveen said that she lived far and her baby sitter was on leave. He offered a solution. Later Shaheeda Parveen made a request which the organization could not fulfill and Anil Sobti was assertive about that. In the end both signed off with a positive feeling. She is happy that the person at the office turned out to be helpful and Anil Sobti is happy that a person cared to know his name and thanked him warmly.

We see that assertive and helpful behaviour not only helps one to arrive at a better solution but also heightens the credibility of the organization. It is helpful for the person handling the telephone calls as well, for a warm and positive feeling reduces stress and thus has health benefits too.

Essentials of speaking over telephone

There are certain basic things that we need to keep in mind when we are talking to clients, contacts or customers over the telephone. They can be listed as:

- ... Smile
- ... Use the caller's name
- ... Be courteous in your language
- ... Echo important points
- ... Acknowledge the person on the other end
- ... Mirror the respondent
- ... Record your conversation for feedback

Smile

Imagine that you are talking to the person face-to-face. Put a smile on your face just as you would in a face-to-face conversation. It will enhance your vocal quality and you will sound pleasant and relaxed. This will convey a pleasant attitude and an enthusiasm on your part. It might appear strange but if you smile while speaking your smile will be carried through the tone of your voice. On the other hand if we are tired or seem bored, our voice carries lack of enthusiasm over the telephone. This will affect your relations with the respondent.

Use the caller's name

It is always a pleasant thing to hear one's name. This makes the person on the other end feel valued-that the person on the other end has taken care to remember his/her name. This is the first step in building rapport. It is important to keep in mind whether to you use the first or the surname. In India using the first name for everyone is not a part of our culture. While first names show greater warmth, surnames can be used to convey respect. Much would depend on the culture of one's organization and that of the person on the other end.

A: Good morning, Spectrum Internet Services.

B: Good morning. I think my Internet is down.

A:: Which flat are you speaking from Madam?

B: Oh, this is Mrs. Neha Verma from flat no 161.

A: Mrs. Verma, could you tell me what the page shows when you try to connect to the Internet?

B: It shows 'This page cannot be displayed.'

A: Mrs. Verma, perhaps you need to restart your computer. Please do so and let me know if you still have problem connecting.

B: All right. (after a pause). Ah, it's connected. Thank you.

A: It's a pleasure, Mrs. Verma.

Be courteous in your language

It is extremely necessary to use courteous expressions like 'please', 'thank you', 'it's a pleasure', 'I'd be glad to help you' which will help to make the conversation smooth and pleasant for both. We also need to remember that the image of the organization is conveyed through our interaction with others and courtesy will help to convey a positive image.

Echo important points

Echoing is an integral part of active listening. When we echo the important points, the benefits are dual. One, it helps us to stay on track and second we can always cross-check if we have heard right. We could use expressions like, "So you are saying you sent a list of books on computing," or "May I repeat, Sir? Your UPS is not giving power back-up, right?" If you make a practice of doing this there would be less misunderstanding and the right service can be rendered.

Acknowledge the person on the other end

If the person is calling for the second or third time we ought to acknowledge him or her with 'Hello, Mrs. Singh. How can I help you?' or if we are aware of the problem then it is nice to show that we remember the problem. At the same time if the respondent is appearing harassed, then we need to be empathetic and do our best to help. It is also important to note that for the respondent the issue is important or he/she would not have called. Thus we should acknowledge the problem and address it suitably.

Here is an example:

A: Hello, Global Computers.

B: Hello, I'm calling from, Gandhinagar. I'm calling with regard to the printer I talked to you about last week.

A: Oh, hello, Mr. Bhuvan. I remember you had called regarding the 3400 series printer. Is it still giving trouble?

B: Yes. I am exasperated. It prints so erratically. Sometime it stops printing and shows the message 'ink levels are not available'. You see, after talking to you I had put in original cartridges. I have a presentation tomorrow and I still cannot get any printing done.

A: I am sorry that you are going through this trouble Mr. Bhuvan. I can understand how frustrating it can be. Let me check with the technical department if they can send someone to check the machine. Would you be home today?

B: Yes, do send someone after 4 in the afternoon.

A: Don't worry, Sir. He'll first give you a call before he comes. He shall also bring a substitute printer so that your important work can be finished.

B: Oh, that would be great. Thank you so much for your help.

A: It's a pleasure. You are one of our valued customers. Bye.

Mirror the respondent

Mirroring the respondent means matching the vocabulary, the rate of speech or the point of view of the respondent. This means that if the respondent is a technical person we need not try to explain and simplify it for him/her assuming that he/she has the information. On the other hand, if the person is a novice, we would need to avoid jargon and might have to explain things in a simple way to help him/her understand. And suppose, the speaker is speaking very slowly, then we would alter our speed of delivery accordingly. We should not try to contradict what the person is saying just to win an argument. It is a good idea to empathize and then slowly win the person over to our point of view. The respondent becomes agreeable and begins to understand.

Record Conversation for feedback

If we are new to the profession then it helps to record our calls. We can hear how we come through. We can listen to the CD and note if we are too slow, fast or if we appear aggressive, indifferent or helpful. We can also get rid of our speech mannerisms if we listen to our recorded conversation once in a while. Some organizations have a system of monitoring calls. We can listen to these recordings so that we can review and improve ourselves.

Thus we see that if we are handling the telephone calls for our organization we need to be good listeners, good speakers, sensitive to the needs and feelings of others and ready to help because all these contribute to image building.

Check your progress 4

Answer the questions below.

- 1 What are the three major attitudes that are conveyed through our voice and tone?

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- 2 Which is the recommended attitude for effective office management?

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- 3 What are the essentials of speaking over the telephone?

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- 4 What is the advantage of recording our calls?

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5.6 TELEPHONE ETIQUETTE

Telephone etiquette has been addressed in the previous sections under basic telephone skills, listening and speaking skills. A few more things that we need to pay attention to are the following:

1 *Pull yourself from whatever you are doing.*

We need to put away reading material, stop checking our emails or preparing a draft of something or even our snack and coffee when the telephone rings. This way we would not appear distracted to the caller and would not miss out any important point. If we are still paying attention to whatever we were doing earlier then our pauses will become longer and we would be asking our respondents to repeat themselves which will tell them clearly that we are distracted. This can make them unhappy and irritated. Our centre of interest should be the caller or the respondent and nothing else.

2 *Prepare your phone voice*

The tone of voice and speed of delivery has been discussed at length in the earlier sections. And it is true that a person's phone voice is not the normal uninhibited voice. At times our voice is not very pleasant, for example we were having an argument with someone when the telephone rings. Now, if we just pick up the phone and respond then our tone will sound aggressive. So we need to consciously switch to our pleasant friendly phone voice before we pick up the receiver. We need to take a breath, smile, assume our telephone voice and then respond to the call.

3 *Make a good impression with a pleasant greeting*

It is important to make the first impression with an effective and efficient greeting. Your organization may have a standard greeting. Use that rather than long winded greetings that take a long time.

4 *Treat the caller with respect*

Phrases like 'I don't know', 'It can't be done', 'Just a second', 'You must have....' Or 'No' are negative and might make us appear unwilling to help. They are best avoided. This does not mean that we should not be honest. In case something is not possible we need to send the message across with 'We would be happy to help but I'm afraid this may not be possible for our organization' or 'I'm sorry, we may not be able to help you here'.

5 *Take care while placing the caller on hold*

Before placing a caller on hold, we need to ask their permission first and thank them when we resume the conversation. It is also not a good practice to keep the caller on hold for a long time. In such case we should promise to call back and disconnect. And then according to our promise, we should never forget to call back.

6 *Answer promptly*

We should not allow the phone to ring more than three times. Allowing

the phone to ring long before answering it gives the impression of tardiness in the office. It irritates the caller.

7 *Learn to handle two or three calls at time*

There may be occasions when another telephone rings while we attending to a call. As per our habit we pick up the second phone and excusing yourself from the first one respond to the second caller promising to call back.

8 *Signing off*

When hanging up the phone, we need to make sure the caller or the person who called hangs up first. Otherwise, always hang up the phone, gently. A remote, hands-free headset is convenient as it does not need to be slammed down and can be gently disconnected.

This will solve hanging up as you push release on the headset to hang up the phone. A headset also does not tie us to our desk. The phone can also be answered if away from your desk.

Check your progress 5

Mention some of the aspects of telephone etiquette.

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.....

5.7 GRAMMAR FOCUS

We use different types of sentences during telephonic conversation. We use assertive sentences to inform, interrogative sentences to make enquiries, requests or offers and imperative sentences to make requests, give instructions or orders. And client may express his or her feelings using an exclamatory sentence.

Activity 1

1 Modals can be used in multiple ways in different kinds of sentences to express different things. Look at the sentences below and complete them using appropriate modals given below. One modal can be used in more than one place. You may use the shortened forms wherever required.

will would should shall won't

- iyou give me your mobile number, please?
- ii You allow the machine to cool down before you start it again.
- iii I need help. The car start.you send someone to look at it?
- ivyou listen to me, please?
- v I assure you the engineercome to your house within ten hours.
- vi I have been sending mails to have the error in the policy rectified. I wish someone in your officedo the needful.

- vii I'm sorry to hear about your inconvenience. I send the mechanic to look at it?
- viii Irather go for double door refrigerator.
- ix I think youcheck your product well before delivery.
- x You have been most unhelpful! I.....write a complaint to your manager.
- xi I promise youget the delivery before 5 p.m. tomorrow.
- xii Looking at the volume of your work I think yougo for a laser printer.

2 Select appropriate adjectives for the sentences below.

- i The Lara XV has a more(efficient/effective) engine. Its petrol consumption is less. Moreover, it is less (loud/noisy).
- ii We offer you the package at a(discounted/depreciated) price.
- iii I feel that Clause 14, a in your agreement is (needless/redundant) as the point has been covered at Clause 11.
- iv You may rest assured. We use only (washed/sterilized) cotton in our clinic.
- v The company will provide you (maintenance/maintaining) support for 12 months after the purchase of the machine.
- vi The(estimated/ guessed) expenditure for providing media support during the function would be Rs.35,000/-
- vii The mistake committed is indeed(regrettable/deplorable).
- viii We only make(massive/bulk) deliveries to institutes.

5.8 LET US SUM UP

The telephone is an important tool in our lives, be it home or office. At office when we have the job of handling telephones we need to be careful about certain things for the smooth functioning of the office and for a projecting a positive image of our organization. Like all procedures, telephone communication has its nuances and its rules which we must adhere to. We need to be courteous in our greetings and while signing off. We need to obtain specific information through polite questions. Often the problem may be minor and can be solved through telephonic instructions alone. At times the customer is angry or anxious. We must try to read between the lines and move forward accordingly. We must never interrupt a customer, nor should we complete his/her sentences for her. While obtaining necessary information we must jot the points down and keep them ready for future communication. It is also essential to call back instead of waiting for the customer to try and get through again. It is important that at the end of the telephone call both we and our caller have a feeling of satisfaction. This would mean increased business or a heightened image of our organization.

5.9 ANSWERS

Check your progress 1

- 1 One can be prepared for the telephone call by preparing notes on who we are calling or expecting a call from, the relationship of the organization with the person, the purpose, the main points we

need to discuss and questions if any. In this way no time will be wasted.

- 2 We need to make sure who is calling and from where, the reason for calling, nature of problem, if it is a product in question, date of purchase, how the caller is using the product and whether anything had been done to solve the problem.

Example:

Name of the caller: Mr. X

(Individual or representing a company) If from a company, name of the **company:** Clothing Options

Reason for calling: Enquiry regarding an e-printer (Model no.) purchased on Feb, 15.

Nature of problem: The printer does not print even after the mechanic has had a look

How the caller is using the product: For e-printing designs and patterns from designers seated at various places in the office to save time in getting up and coming to the printer situated in a particular room.

What has been done: An earlier complaint had been made and a mechanic from the company had gone to set it right

- 3 Difficult callers need to be handled with tact. We need to listen without interrupting, gather the facts and note them down, sympathize with them and offer to solve the problem, offer apology if required and last but not the least remain calm and not get excited by what he or she is saying.

Your strategy would include the following:

First listen without interrupting or contradicting the person (the customer is always right)

Then through questions gather the facts and make a note of them and promise to get back to them

Express regret at the inconvenience caused, and promise to look into it and keep your promise

If you have made a mistake, apologize without any reservations

Stay calm even though the caller is angry and uses abusive language

- 4 We can give the impression of an efficient helpful office staff by responding to the call promptly, returning calls, not keeping the caller on hold for long and using a confident and pleasant voice.

- 5 Do it yourself.

Check your progress 2

- 1 Environmental factors, trying to follow what is going on around us, focusing on our answer instead of listening, a negative attitude and switching off mentally by taking a mental trip while on the phone act as distracters and do not allow us to get the message of the caller.
- 2 We can listen effectively if we consciously pay attention, encourage the respondent or caller to speak, focus on the ideas and not the style or

mannerisms of the speaker, take down relevant details, act according to the emotional needs of the caller, match our language and information to that of the caller and try to get to the real meaning behind the words.

- 3 Do it yourself.
- 4 Do it yourself.
- 5 Do it yourself.

(Listening Text)

- A: Hello, ABCD Banking services. How may I help you?
B: Hello, my name is Goonj Gandhi. I have an ABCD credit card. I have lost my credit card and want you to block my card. Please do it immediately.
A: Sure, Mr. Gandhi. May I know the number of your card?
B: 0000000011112222
A: Thank you. I shall transfer the call to the Credit Cards department. Please remain on the line.
B: Thanks.
A: Good morning, Sir. This is Aarti from ABCD. May I know the problem, Sir?
B: I have lost my credit card and wished to block it. Sure. But I would need some details before that.
May I have your full name?
B: Goonj, G-O-O-N-J Gandhi, G-A-N-D-H-I.
A: The sixteen digit number of your card, please.
B: 0000000011112222
A: And may I have your date of birth?
B: It is 17 April, 1980.
A: Thank you. Could you please give me your complete address?
B: 14, BC, I Block, Pratham Puri.
A: Thank you very much, Mr. Gandhi. Don't worry, your card has been blocked with immediate effect. Our customer care department will get in touch with you regarding your new card.
B: Thank you very much.

Check your progress 3

Do it yourself.

Check your progress 4

- 1 The three major attitudes that are displayed through our voice are aggression, indifference and assertiveness.
- 2 The assertive attitude is one in which we act confidently, convincingly and do not get cowed down by what the speaker is saying. We show empathy to the speaker but at the same time do not hesitate to tell the truth in a polite fashion.
- 3 The essentials of speaking over the telephone are smiling while talking, using the caller's name, being courteous, echoing the important points to clarify and to tell the speaker that we are paying attention. We need to acknowledge the person on the other end and try to mirror him or her by adjusting to her speed of delivery or simplicity of language. We also record our calls for feedback and improvement.
- 4 The advantage of recording our calls is that we can objectively

listen and find out if our tone and speed of delivery are appropriate or not. We can also discover if we have any speech mannerisms and rectify them.

Check your progress 5

We need to maintain telephone etiquette. These would include the following steps.

- First disengage yourself from whatever you are doing so that you can give your full attention to the caller and register the necessary information or respond adequately and suitably without appearing to be distracted. Be attentive to ensure that you do not have to ask the caller to repeat herself or himself.
- Prepare your phone voice which is would be pleasant, have measured speed of delivery, pleasant and helpful. If we try to smile as we talk then automatically our voice will assume a pleasant tone.
- Make a good impression with a pleasant greeting. Use phrases that are polite and socially acceptable to persons who are important to you.
- Treat the caller with respect and try to offer help. Ask the relevant questions and offer to initiate action as quickly as you can. In case something may take time, be honest and say that to the caller but do not refuse to help or assist.
- Do not slam the phone down. Instead ask the caller if there is any other help he or she wishes to get from you. Wait for the caller to disconnect. In case you need time to look into the matter promise to call back and disconnect. Call back as soon as you can.
- Other aspects of telephone etiquette are to answer the phone promptly and try to manage two calls simultaneously as efficiently as you can without making any one of the callers wait for a long time. You may tell the caller who called later that you will call him/her back. And while signing off make sure the caller hangs up before you do. Do not slam the phone down. You may use a handset to make the disconnection gentle.

Activity 1

- 1
 - i **Would** you give me your mobile number, please?
 - ii You **should** allow the machine to cool down before you start it again.
 - iii I need help. The car **won't** start. **Will** you send someone to look at it?
 - iv **Will** you listen to me, please?
 - v I assure you the engineer **shall** come to your house within ten hours.
 - vi I have been sending mails to have the error in the policy rectified. I wish someone in your office **would** do the needful.
 - vii I'm sorry to hear about your inconvenience. **Shall** I send the mechanic to look at it?
 - viii I **would** rather go for double door refrigerator.
 - ix I think you **should** check your product well before delivery.
 - x You have been most unhelpful! I **will** write a complaint to your manager.
 - xi I promise you **shall** get the delivery before 5 p.m. tomorrow.
 - xii Looking at the volume of your work I think you **should** go for a laser printer.
- 2
 - i The Lara XV has a more **efficient** engine. Its petrol consumption is less. Moreover, it is less **noisy**.
 - ii We offer you the package at a **discounted** price.

- iii I feel that Clause 14, a in your agreement is **redundant** as the point has been covered at Clause 11.
- iv You may rest assured. We use only **sterilized** cotton in our clinic.
- v The company will provide you **maintenance** support for 12 months after the purchase of the machine.
- vi The **estimated** expenditure for providing media support during the function would be Rs.35,000/-
- vii The mistake committed is indeed **regrettable**.
- viii We only make **bulk** deliveries to institutes.

