It’s a Wonder we Understand Each Other at All!

Pre-Reading

1 Discuss the following questions before reading the text.

1. Do you think people from different cultures have different communication styles? If yes, give examples.

2. What do you think are some differences between the way men and women communicate? Give examples.

3. Can you think of individual differences in communication styles that can lead to conflict or misunderstanding?

4. Describe a situation you experienced that involved misunderstanding or miscommunication.

5. What are some things you can do to avoid miscommunication?

2 With a partner, discuss the meaning of each term and how it contributes to successful or unsuccessful communication.

- misinterpret
- disapproval
- empathize
- generalization
- stereotype
- assume

3 Look at the headline and a sentence from the article you are going to read. Explain what the author means. Do you agree? Why? Provide reasons. Provide examples of cases in which this is true.

Then read the full article.

IT’S A WONDER WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER AT ALL!

In everyday conversation, the actual words that come out of someone’s mouth often have very little to do with the message that is received.
Do you hear me? Think how many times you’ve heard someone use that phrase out of anger or frustration. Maybe it was a parent upset at their child. Perhaps it was a boss at work, trying to emphasize or re-emphasize a certain point. Now try to think of just one time when that phrase actually improved understanding of the issue at hand. Chances are you can’t do it. Chances are it only made things worse.

That’s because in everyday conversation, the actual words that come out of someone’s mouth often have very little to do with the message that is received. Communication breakdowns happen constantly, and for a wide variety of reasons. We misinterpret intentions because words can only do so much to promote understanding. If words aren’t accompanied by a shared understanding of other areas such as culture, life experience, and personal style – or, at an absolute minimum, awareness on both sides that these differences can exist and will themselves have an impact – then the result can be a communication catastrophe.

In some cultures, silence means disapproval; depending on the social position of the speakers, it would be far too rude to disagree or turn down a request in public. Yet in other cultures silence can be taken as assent. It’s assumed that if someone didn’t like what was happening, they’d let you know. When these two cultures clash, it’s no wonder there are misunderstandings!

Each culture has its own communication conventions or rules: about how often we make eye contact, how we express politeness, how loudly we speak, how we interpret silence, how directly or indirectly we make a request or let someone know what we want, how close we stand when speaking to one another, how much information we share, how we motivate others, how we argue or how we complain. Some cultures may perceive indirectness as dishonest; others may perceive it as polite. As a result, someone who makes requests directly (Please write this report today) may be annoyed by someone who uses indirect requests (This report needs to be written today). Paying attention to body language and seeking clarification can help overcome some of these misunderstandings.

Gender can also influence how we communicate. Author John Gray suggests men and women think differently, have different emotional needs and express these needs differently … so much that they can seem like they are from different planets (hence one of his book titles, Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.) Gray claims that when talking about problems or frustrations, women will listen and empathize while men will offer solutions. Similarly, author Deborah Tannen claims that the language between women is mostly “rapport talk,” used to build bonds of friendship, trust and understanding. Language between men is “report talk” – used to provide information to get something accomplished.

While these generalizations about gender and cultural influences are helpful, they are only generalizations. In other words, when it comes down to a particular phone conversation, a chance encounter on the street or an office meeting, making assumptions can be risky. Putting too much stock in generalizations can lead to stereotyping … and at that point the roadblocks to understanding start piling on top of each other.

But awareness of differences is only a precondition for understanding, not a guarantee it will happen. When that awareness of differences is accompanied by a commitment to explain and clarify your intentions, and to request the same of others, you’re getting somewhere. Arriving at a shared understanding is not an easy process, but well worth the effort!!
Vocabulary Building

4 Below are words from the article. Write the correct letter on each line to match the words with their meanings.

1. ____ intention a. to explain, make clear
2. ____ assume b. to give a wrong meaning to; misunderstand
3. ____ empathize c. to call attention to; make important
4. ____ disapproval d. lack of approval
5. ____ misinterpret e. to understand another’s feelings or motives
6. ____ emphasize f. a general rule or idea that is inferred from particular facts or examples
7. ____ clarify g. accepted to be true without proof
8. ____ rapport h. an oversimplified mental picture of a group of people
9. ____ stereotype i. to help something happen
10. ____ claim j. a harmonious relationship with someone
11. ____ promote k. to maintain; say as a fact
12. ____ generalization l. the purpose behind an action or statement

5 Write a noun for each of the verbs below. Use either the noun or the verb form in sentences.

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<th>VERB</th>
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<tr>
<td>perceive</td>
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Comprehension

6 Read the statements below and circle true or false. In the article, find the paragraphs that confirm your answers.

1. There are many reasons why we do not communicate well with each other. T F
2. Men and women may communicate in different ways. T F
3. When we know someone from another culture, we can predict how all people in that culture communicate. T F
4. Generalizations about gender and cultural influences are not helpful. T F
5. To communicate well with others, we need to be aware of differences in communication styles, culture and life experiences. T F
6. Understanding the cultural differences of others will eliminate misunderstandings. T F
7. Understanding someone’s body language can help in understanding what they are saying. T F
8. One of the reasons for miscommunication is that we misinterpret the other person’s intentions. T F

7 Answer the questions below using information from the article.

1. How would you define a communication breakdown?
2. What are the reasons for miscommunication mentioned in the text?
3. What are some examples of how cultural norms and conventions can impact our communication style?
4. In what way does the text say gender can influence the way people communicate?
5. Why is making generalizations about gender and culture a risky thing to do?
6. What can we do to minimize communication breakdowns?

8 Active listening is a well-known strategy for maintaining good communication. Search the Internet for tips on active listening. Give a short presentation on elements of active listening that you find particularly interesting.

Possible search term: active listening
Discuss each situation in small groups. Identify the potential causes of misunderstanding and suggest possible ways they could have been avoided.

**Situation 1**
Ms. Jones has been asked to fill in for an absent employee by looking after the reception desk at a conference. Her boss explains her duties: check off lists of pre-registrants, accept new registrations, print out name tags, distribute conference material and give out information about the conference workshops and locations. As her boss is going through all of the explanations, Ms. Jones realizes she doesn’t understand all the details because her boss is talking too quickly. However, she keeps nodding her head to show she is listening. After explaining everything, her boss asks if Ms. Jones has any questions. Ms. Jones is completely overwhelmed and has no idea what questions to ask, so she says “No.” Her boss thinks everything is fine and leaves. Meanwhile Ms. Jones is left at the registration desk convinced that she is unprepared for the job.

**Situation 2**
Ewa is vice-president of an organization that has management meetings every Tuesday morning. All the managers give updates about what has been happening in their departments. Ewa is very proud of her department. She believes that her staff is functioning well and achieving very good results. She wants to make sure her staff’s contributions are acknowledged by the other managers, so she gives very detailed reports, mentioning names and respective accomplishments. Meanwhile, the other managers all give brief reports. They mention only broad categories and seem to be impatient and uninterested when Ewa is giving her report. Ewa feels that her department is not being shown the respect it deserves.

**Situation 3**
Martha is a 48-year-old artist and mother of a teenaged daughter. She has been mentoring her daughter’s friend, Sophia, who wants to become an artist some day. Martha and Sophia have just started communicating by email.

Martha finds that Sophia’s messages are very short and abbreviated. She feels a little offended at the tone and style of the messages. She wonders if she should address this with Sophia, or simply try to communicate less with her.