

RAISE THE LEVEL OF CONVERSATION BY USING PARAPHRASING AS A LISTENING SKILL

*since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you ...*
— E.E. Cummings

I've just left Rome, and though I spoke through a translator, I am very clear that emotion was being expressed in the room. Just as E.E. Cummings knew that feeling is integral to relationships, we know that the expression and recognition of feelings is a major factor in conversational competence. This column explores the importance of expressing feeling and thinking.

THINKING AND FEELING

Meetings facilitate reflecting, planning, problem solving, constructing, and building community. None of us are cognitive machines, processing only logic and analysis. Decisions are often informed by gut reasoning and feelings. Too often I have seen a group member temporarily overcome with sadness or discomfort, and the group tries to either comfort the person ("It's all right, dear") or withdraw. Both of these responses signal that the group prefers that members bring only parts of themselves to a meeting and that expressing emotion makes others uncomfortable. A more respectful response, and one more useful to the group, is to accept feelings with an acknowledging paraphrase. Paraphrasing encourages elaboration, which ultimately moves the group's work into cognitive domains in which content can be addressed.

PARAPHRASING

Mention paraphrasing to some, and they experience a sense of uneasiness. Sometimes, participants feel uneasy because they have been on the receiving end of ineffective paraphrasing. In addition, paraphrasing has generally been treated as a language skill, when it is a listening skill. Phrases such as "I think I hear you saying ..." may become robotic with repetition, conveying a sense of inauthenticity.

Listening and then paraphrasing well is hard work. In both the Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools work,

ROBERT J. GARMSTON is co-founder of Center for Adaptive Schools and a professor emeritus at California State University, Sacramento's School of Education. You can contact him at FABob@aol.com.

however, we have learned that it can become easier in two ways.

Turn "I" into "you"

Drop the "I" at the beginning of a paraphrasing statement and use "you" instead. This eliminates the need to remember and use a nonessential beginning to a paraphrase. An "I" in the paraphrase subtly shifts the message so that it becomes about you and not about the person to whom you are responding. "I" also signals that your statement is an interpretation of what was said, further distancing yourself from the speaker.

Improve your listening skills

Paraphrases are never the majority of listening responses in a conversation. Listening includes verbal behaviors (OK, yeah, I got it), nonverbal behaviors (eye contact, mirroring, physical referencing,) asking questions, or probing for specificity. Listening is balanced with putting one's own ideas and feelings on the table.

All good paraphrases reflect both thinking and feeling. Reflected feelings do not always need to be in words, but instead can be communicated by tone of voice, facial expression, or posture.

THREE TYPES OF PARAPHRASE

Why paraphrase? In my work with groups, whenever members start spontaneously paraphrasing one another, I know a watershed in group development has occurred.

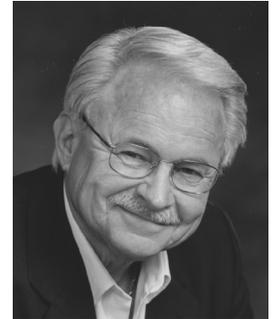
Speakers know they have been heard or that you have attempted to understand them. Paraphrases help you check your understanding of the speaker's meaning and occasionally paraphrases can clarify a speaker's thinking. Paraphrases are categorized into three types, each with its own distinctive structure and purpose:

- Acknowledge and clarify;
- Summarize and organize; and
- Shift discourse to a higher or lower logical level.

Acknowledge and clarify

This form of paraphrase serves as a mirror to the speaker, reflecting what has been understood. When a paraphrase misstates the speaker's meaning, the speaker often elaborates, making necessary corrections. In this way, both parties are clear about the communication.

Listening is direct, and stems are simple. "You are thinking ..." "You are wondering ..." "We (a group mem-



In each issue of *JSD*, Robert J. Garmston writes about how to create collaborative work environments that result in improved student learning. His columns can be found at www.nsd.org.

COMMENT	SHIFT UP	SHIFT DOWN
This class is making me crazy: no respect, no order, no following directions.	Value: Discipline is very important to you.	So a choice for you might be to make some rules about raising hands, taking turns, being courteous, etc.
If they won't study, they won't learn, yet some kids don't do homework and still test well.	Belief: You believe that learning requires effort, yet for some kids, this doesn't seem to be so.	So it's puzzling that Aldo doesn't seem to study, yet he excels on tests.
Some of our group meetings are unfocused and a waste of time.	Goal: What you want is a productive team.	You want people on time, prepared, and on topic.

ber speaking for the group) are considering ...” “In other words ...”

Summarize and organize

Sometimes a paraphrase clarifies a speaker’s thinking: The speaker understands what she or he said as if hearing it for the first time. This is especially true for speakers who think aloud or for communications that are complex. To do this, the listener stops listening for details, and listens for themes or patterns instead. This is an achievable focus when a speaker is covering many details.

The summarize-and-organize paraphrase metaphorically puts ideas into baskets or containers.

- “We seem to be struggling with three themes: where to ____, how to ____, and who should ____.”
- “On the one hand, we ____ and on the other, we ____.”

Shift logical levels of the conversation

Group members may have difficulty detecting meaning when the speaker is either exceptionally abstract or exclusively concrete. Recently, a group of primary teachers was telling war stories about children’s behavior. The settings

varied — on the bus, in the lunchroom, on the playground — but the theme remained the same: Someone did something hurtful to someone else. A teacher listening to this conversation said, “Our students do not show much respect for each other.” Suddenly the conversation shifted to the more useful topic of respect — what would it look like, and how can we teach it?

A paraphrase can also ground concepts when they get too abstract. A participant might say, “The problem here is communication.” If a facilitator responds with, “So you would like members to include each other on the memos they send,” she has turned an abstraction — communication — into a specific behavior she knew was important to group members. This is likely to shift the conversation to other behavioral manifestations of good communication.

To develop an appreciation of differing logic levels of discourse, think of an escalator. First floor, *Ford*, second floor, *car*, third floor, *transportation*. To shift down to a more specific level, search for a word or concept that would be subsumed in the term you heard from the speaker. To shift up in logic level to a more general term, search for a category that would include the concept you heard. Stop listening for details or themes. Listen for what you believe to be the unexpressed meaning under the words. Because you will be making inferences as you use this form of paraphrasing, proceed with exploratory language and an approachable voice. The table above contains examples of such paraphrases.

BEYOND PARAPHRASING

Other strategies address both the thinking and feeling aspects of collaborative work. Groundings, used at the beginning of meetings to value each voice in the room, can cover both. (See example at left.) This activity also gives participants opportunities to practice effective listening and paraphrasing behaviors.

REFERENCE

Cummings, E.E. (1994). *One hundred selected poems*. New York: Grove/Atlantic.

GROUNDING ACTIVITY

Form groups of six to eight.

- Members take turns talking.
- When one member talks, all others are silent.
- After everyone has talked, the first person to talk summarizes what was said.

Post on a flip chart what you would like members to talk about:

- My name is ...
- My relationship to this topic is ...
- My expectations are ...
- How I feel about being here is ...

When all groups are finished, the facilitator calls on the first person in each group to give a summary statement to the full assembly.

- During a grounding, everyone needs to have uninterrupted time to talk and know that they are understood. Groundings, therefore, should be timed based on the needs of the group, not governed by the clock.