



Minimizing the risks of misunderstandings

The challenge

Misunderstandings are frequent in communication situations. There are many causes: vague vocabulary, mutual distrust between the individuals involved, the tendency to keep certain elements under your belt for fear of upsetting the other, etc. Above all, the consequences can be far-reaching: one wrongly interpreted word, one misunderstood allusion, can be enough to cloud your message. Certain tips can help you to limit this risk.

Two areas for vigilance

1

Eliminate sources of ambiguity in your speech

Your listeners do not have the same subject knowledge as you do. Things that seem evident to you may easily be interpreted by them in a biased way.

- **Concentrate on the essential.** The longer your speech, the more complex it is and the more detail it contains, the greater the likelihood that your audience will not understand some elements of it.
- **Do not settle for generalities.** Avoid using terms which are too abstract and formulations which leave room for interpretation. Instead, explain the practical consequences of what you are stating.
Example: "We would like to improve our customer service. Concretely, this means above all shorter waiting times at the agency and a more user-friendly and secure website."
- **Avoid jargon**, even if you have to simplify. Faced with an audience of non-specialists, vocabulary which is too technical easily leads to misunderstandings.
Example: For an audience of operational staff, prefer "our business earned less this year than before"; rather than "our gross operating profit has considerably declined".
- When you do have to use technical terms whose meaning is not necessarily clear to all, remember to **provide a definition**.
- Pay particular attention to **explaining the logical flow of your ideas**. The key turning points in a speech require an effort of understanding from the listener. Often, it is at these moments that he loses the plot.
- Do not be afraid of **repeating the essential points of your speech several times**. Mentioning an idea or a fact only once is rarely enough to faithfully imprint it on the mind of all your listeners.
- **Use visual supports**. In this way, you provide "presence" to your ideas which will ease comprehension and memorization.

2

Through your attitude, encourage your listeners to open up to asking questions

If your listeners mistrust you, they will hesitate to ask questions and have a tendency to interpret the slightest ambiguity in the wrong way.

- Try to **reduce the distance between you and your audience**. If your speech (tone used, choice of words or examples, etc.) or your style (greeting, dress, etc.) are perceived as distant or disconnected from the reality of your listeners, they will be less likely to express themselves freely.
- **Make a clear distinction between facts and your opinion**. Your audience should not have the impression that you are trying to pass off as indisputable reality something that is only your own point of view.
- Demonstrate that you recognize the **legitimate right to have an opinion that differs from yours**, without nevertheless systematically renouncing your own point of view.
- **Avoid value judgements** which may offend.
Example: "Can anyone who has never met a customer really have an opinion on this matter?"
- **Do not shy away from potentially controversial issues**. If your listeners feel that you are trying to hide disagreement under a smokescreen of consensus, they will doubt your sincerity.