

SPACE: THE FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS of SKILLFUL DISCUSSION and DIALOGUE

S—Silence: Providing time for self and others to think and wait.

Thoughtfulness is enhanced when team members become skilled at four types of silence:

- After a question is asked.
- After someone speaks.
- Before you respond.
- An intentional, named pause to allow reflection.

P—Paraphrasing: Reflecting content and/or feelings back to the speaker.

According to Carl Rogers, the paraphrase is probably the single most important communication tool and the most under-used. Paraphrasing communicates that I am attempting to understand you, therefore, I value you. Paraphrases are more effective when they do not begin with the pronoun “I.” “What I hear you saying...” signals to many speakers that his/her thoughts no longer matter and that the person paraphrasing is now going to insert his or her own ideas. Paraphrasing may include one or more of the following types: simple, summary, or a shift.

A—Accepting language: Using nonjudgmental responses and body language.

When people feel judged, their thinking shuts down. When a team member does not label a thought or an action as good/bad, effective/ineffective, etc. the opportunity for problem solving and creative thinking is increased. The phrase, “Help me understand...” is heard frequently in an accepting exchange. Accepting language is often nonverbal—the lean forward, eye contact, a smile, or nod. The combination of nonjudgmental comments and open body language helps build rapport that will support clarifying questions and probing for evidence.

C—Clarifying questions: Asking questions to encourage reflection or to deepen the listener’s understanding.

A skilled communicator uses a variety of question types as they are appropriate to support the thinking of the speaker. Some questions simply elicit additional information (clarifying), some questions are authentically open-ended (reflective), and some questions seek examples or data (probing). A few examples are:

- Tell me what you mean by. . . ?
- In what ways is this similar to. . . ?
- What themes or patterns seem to be emerging?
- Would you tell me what led you to that conclusion?
- What do you see as the next step?

E—Evidence: Probing for specificity and precision or asking for examples or data.

Clarity of thought is increased as specific information is surfaced. The human brain is hardwired to form quick generalizations. However, this thinking pattern can blind us to new insights or position us to act from flawed conclusions. The skilled communicator will often encourage the speaker to step back from generalizations by soliciting specific examples or data. Likewise, reflection is often deepened when we probe for specificity in the following areas:

- Vague nouns and pronouns: they, community, students.
- Vague action words: improve, modify, implement.
- Comparators: best, more, least.
- Rule words: must, can't, should, have to.
- Universal quantifiers: everyone, all, no one, never, always.

Adapted from the work of Art Costa.