

Communication Skills for Formative Dialogue Directed Toward Missionary Discipleship¹

Effective formative dialogue requires six skills:

1. reflective (or active) listening, 2. open-ended questions, 3. summarizing responses, 4. empathy, 5. affirmation, and 6. assessment.

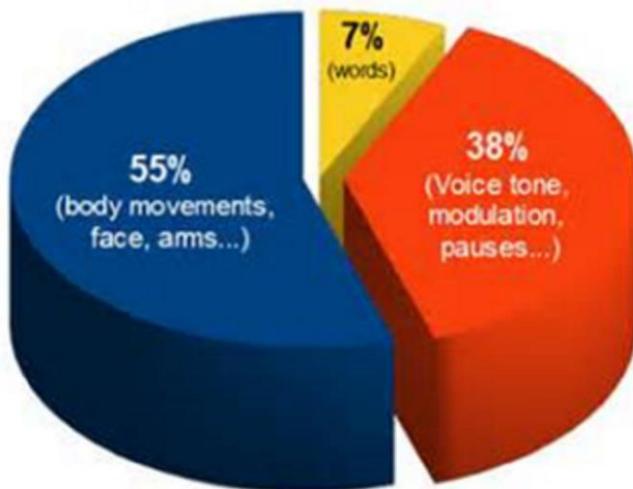
1. Reflective Listening: A strategy of communication involving two steps:

1. Formator seeks to understand what the seminarian meant by what he said.
2. Formator seeks to confirm the accuracy of what he understood.

A common obstacle is that the formator assumes he or she knows what the seminarian means. For example, he or she hears the seminarian say, “I wish I was more outgoing.” The seminarian may be thinking:

- “I feel lonely and I want to have more friends.”
- “I get very nervous when I have to speak to a group of people.”
- “I should spend more time getting to know people.”
- “I can’t think of anything to say when I am with people.”

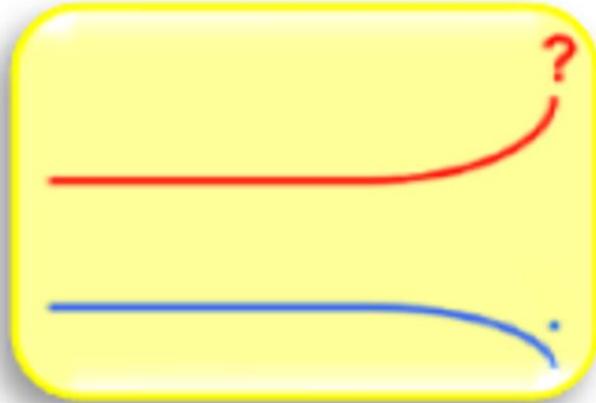
In addition to the words chosen by the seminarian, attention should be paid to the seminarian’s non-verbal communication. 93% of communication occurs non-verbally:



For example, tone of voice can convey two very different meanings to identical words. (“You

¹ Cf. pp. 57-72 of *The Art of Accompaniment: Practical Steps for the Seminary Formator* by Sister Marysia Weber, RSM (En Route Books and Media, 2018).

were feeling uncomfortable?” or “You were feeling uncomfortable.”)



2. Open-Ended Questions

Posing open-ended questions offers an invitation to describe an experience in greater detail. For example:

- What was it like to hear/learn...?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- What effect did that have on you?
- What effect does this have on you now?
- What do you think you need to do at this time?
- What else will help?

Open-ended questions facilitate deeper self-reflection.

3. Summarizing Responses

The formator recounts observations made of the patterns of thought, feelings, and behaviors of the seminarian. The seminarian should also be given an opportunity to verify or correct the observations of the formator.

4. Empathy

Empathy engenders a sense of being cared about, respected and understood. A seminarian is worried about a big philosophy test tomorrow, and he did not do well on his last exam. The formator responds: “You hope you will do better on tomorrow’s exam than you did on the last one.” This is an example of **empathy**.

There are several ways to respond that do not exemplify empathy²:

- “You’ll do just fine.” – **Reassurance**
- “I agree, philosophy tests are hard!” – **Sympathy**
- “Let’s talk about the Cardinal’s game and forget the test.” – **Avoidance**
- “There are a lot of tests in life. Don’t worry about this one.” – **Minimizing**
- “Just study as much as you can and then don’t worry about it.” – **Giving Advice**
- “When I felt that way as a seminarian, what I did about it was...” – **Comparing**
- “If you think you have it bad, we had seminary chores to do when I was a seminarian in addition to studying.” – **Topping the Story**

5. Affirmation

Affirmation is a recognition of the seminarian’s strivings. It incites hope and growth in self-confidence. By providing affirmation, the formator helps the seminarian remain focused on a formation goal. For example:

- “You were resourceful in addressing this situation.”
- “That is a good suggestion.”
- “You are making progress in...”
- “It’s clear you are trying to grow in your...”

6. Assessment

Accompaniment also includes periodic assessments of the seminarian’s level of affective maturity. Assessing seeks to ascertain the degree to which seminary formation has been interiorized. For example:

- Has the seminarian exhibited maturation in his thoughts, feelings and behaviors that embody and manifest a potential for missionary discipleship?
- Where areas of further growth are needed, practical recommendations are to be made for furthering human development.
- Details of associated markers of human maturation and associated questions are in chapter two.

While the formator engages the seminarian in this formative process, it remains the obligation of the seminarian to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in all aspects of his formation.

² Adapted from J.M. Connor and D. Killian, 2012 PuddleDancer Press