

Raising The Game on Disability  
Topic 05 – Communication,  
Social Etiquette and Language

June 2013

## Time

30 minutes

## Objectives

At the end of this topic learners will be able to:

- explain what is meant by non-verbal communication
- list examples of 'social etiquette'
- list appropriate language to be used when referring to disabled people.

## Learning Points

This topic will cover the following learning points:

- Communication.
- Social etiquette.
- Language.

## Topic Preparation

- Flipchart and pens

## Support Material

- Welcoming Disabled Customers Guide – available from the Intranet at:  
DWP >> A-Z >> Disability Information, useful contacts and links >>  
Business Disability Forum.

Handouts:

- HO 05.01 – Language.
- HO 05.02 – Further Information.

## Validation

Successful completion of this topic will be measured by question and answer.

## Method of Delivery

This topic is facilitator led and has been designed to be run as a workshop.

It also includes:

- facilitator input; and
- group exercise.



Introduce this topic by saying that clearly the DVD has highlighted examples of bad communication and disabled people face this kind of treatment regularly – we all need to try more to improve our communications and think about all our actions and how they impact on our customers and particularly those customers who we may have to treat more favourably in order to treat them equally.

Think about anticipating reasonable adjustments – do we do enough to make sure our communications are understood by our customers? Remember those customers who may need adjustments such as access to Easy Read materials. These individuals are the least likely to ask for this option and therefore if it isn't anticipated by us, then we may not be getting our messages across and subjecting these individuals to difficulties when trying to access benefits and jobs.

Refer to the 'Welcoming Disabled Customers' guide produced by the Business Disability Forum and available in PDF format on the intranet.

You may find it useful to have your own copy to show to the group and to explain how to access it from the DWP Intranet.

# Communication, Etiquette and Language

## Introduction

Many people are unused to meeting and talking with disabled people and consequently they aren't always sure how to go about it. They often feel embarrassed and anxious and feel they might say or do the wrong thing and cause offence. There is no checklist to follow but a number of things should be borne in mind which will help.

## Non-verbal communication

It is generally accepted that much – if not most – of people's feelings are communicated via non-verbal communication (body language). The sending and receiving of these 'emotional' messages is almost sub-conscious and they play a major role in determining how interactions take place between people. Disabled people's non-verbal communication may not always work in the same way that it does for non-disabled people and this can create some problems and be a cause of discomfort to those not used to it. For example, not being able to make eye contact with a visually impaired person or not having voice intonation in someone with a speech impairment can prove unsettling and have a negative impact on the interaction simply because one channel of information is not working in the way it usually does. It is important to be

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aware that this might be an issue as most of these exchanges take place sub-consciously.



Conduct a 'brainstorming' exercise by asking the group to call out what they think the main areas are to consider.

Write their responses on flipchart.



Answers should include:

- Proximity (too close, invading personal space).
- Orientation (face to face/at the person's eye level/consider furniture barriers).
- Posture (leg/arm crossing – negative, leaning forward – warm welcoming).
- Facial expression (eye browsed raised, smile, poker face).
- Appearance (official/first impressions/trust).
- Gestures (hand movements/nodding/shaking head).
- Eye contact (good use of eye contact where possible).
- Tone of voice. (It's not what you say but how you say it!)

## Social Etiquette

It is important for us all to be aware of what we refer to as 'social etiquette' when engaging with disabled people.



In this instance, 'social etiquette' is a term describing guidelines dealing specifically with how to approach and engage with people with disabilities.



Divide the learners into two groups.

Ask one group to consider examples of social etiquette when talking to:

- a hearing impaired person
- a visually impaired person
- someone with a speech impairment

Ask the other group to consider examples of social etiquette when:

- talking to a wheelchair user
- providing assistance.

Ask each group to note their examples on flipchart before bringing the groups back together to feedback.





Examples should include:

- Disabled people are individuals just like everybody else;
- Don't patronise or make assumptions about their abilities or needs;
- Don't forget some disabilities are not apparent, for example epilepsy and mental illness;
- Even when a disabled person is with someone, talk to the disabled person directly;
- If someone has difficulty understanding you - perhaps because they have a learning disability - be patient, where necessary, explain something more than once and use simple language;
- Don't ask personal questions about a person's disability as these are intrusive and rude;
- If someone looks 'different' do not stare at them;
- If you are talking to an adult, treat them like an adult;
- Talk naturally and only raise your voice if it helps the communication process;
- Only touch disabled people if you need to attract

their attention and there is no other way of doing so, e.g., in a dangerous situation or where background noise makes it impossible to gain the person's attention, etc. However, ensure you only touch lightly and briefly and on a non-threatening part of the body, e.g., elbow or shoulder;

- Never compromise a person's right to privacy and dignity;
- Treat disabled people the same way as you would anyone else and in the way you would like to be treated.

**When talking to a hearing impaired person:**

- Talk to them directly even if they are accompanied by a sign language interpreter;
- If they lip read make sure your face is in the light, look directly at the person and speak clearly and naturally – don't try and help by changing the way you talk;
- If you are not understood be prepared to repeat yourself or rephrase what you have said.

**When talking to a visually impaired person:**

- Introduce yourself on first meeting;

- When you are going to move away tell them.

**When talking to someone with a speech impairment:**

- Be patient and don't try to guess what they want to say or finish their sentences;
- If you don't understand, don't pretend you do. Instead ask them to repeat what they have said;
- Ask straightforward questions which require short answers or a nod/shake of the head.

**When talking to a wheelchair user:**

- Facilitate eye contact, e.g., by sitting down, facing the wheelchair user or taking a step backwards;
- Don't lean on the wheelchair - it is part of the user's personal space;
- Don't push a person in a wheelchair without permission.

**Providing assistance:**

- Never assume that a disabled person needs help and always ask before providing it.
- If someone looks as if they need assistance, offer it, but wait for them to accept before you help.

- In offering assistance don't ask leading questions, for example, "are you OK?" as this tends to evoke the response of "yes". Instead ask something like "excuse me, can I help?" or "excuse me, may I assist?".
- If assistance is requested ask how you may help. All disabled people have their own preferences about how they like to be helped and you need to respect this; you should not assume how any help should be provided.
- If assistance is turned down don't let that put you off offering help to someone else in the future. Disabled people vary widely in their responses to offers of help and their need for it. Remember they should be treated as individuals.
- If assisting a blind person, tell them what is happening, as they may need to respond, e.g., if there are any steps, tell them whether the steps go up or down.
- Remember that assistance dogs are working dogs, not pets. They should not be fed, patted or distracted when they are working.
- A good rule of thumb is to consider whether what you are doing adversely impacts on the disabled

person's dignity and if it does, then perhaps you are not providing assistance effectively.



According to figures published in 2009 by the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), there were 18,000 people using Braille in the UK.

According to figures published by British Sign Language (BSL), there are currently 125,000 adult and 20,000 children in the UK that use BSL.

## Language

Some of the words and phrases we use can offend disabled people because they suggest that the disabled person is dependent, helpless or a victim. Some words such as 'cripple' or 'retarded' have become terms of abuse or are used to make fun of disabled people.



Issue Handout HO 05.01 – Language

This handout lists some common words to avoid with suggested alternatives.



Using HO 05.01 facilitate a discussion around the language to be avoided / used.

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Issue Handout HO 05.02 – Further Information.



Ask the learners if they have any questions before continuing with the next topic.

**END OF TOPIC 05**