

Basic Communication Skills

On-Air Training
Idaho Falls Bishops' Storehouse
9 September 2015

We had a number of people participate in the FSQ net on Saturday and I received a couple of positive comments about learning new protocols. I hope last week's training was helpful or at least informative.

Have you ever experienced that "thing" where you buy a new car and all of a sudden it seems like everyone is driving the same make and model that you just bought? Well, I've kind of had that experience for the last couple of weeks, but in relation to basic communication skills. It seems like every time I turn around, there is another article or reference or question about basic radio communication skills.

On QRZ the other day, I ran across Mitch Stern's (W1SJ) presentation "Techniques of the best operators" that he gave at the Dayton Hamvention. I was browsing through the ARRL Emergency Communication Handbook and came across a chapter on Basic Communication Skills. (I read it three times). Seeing that chapter, prompted me to review a similar chapter in our ERC Handbook with a similar title, "Basic Radio Communication Skills". Then I was visiting with a fairly new operator who had some questions about some basic operating techniques.

With all of my run-ins with "the basics", I decided I was probably meant to share some of it with you.

I haven't been licensed for too terribly long compared to some of you and I know that I still frequently make mistakes. So the training tonight is every bit as much a reminder for me, if not more, as it is for you.

Importance of Good Communication

I don't know if I can stress enough how important *good* communication is. At the risk of being over dramatic, let me just say that someday, someone's life could quite literally depend upon you getting a message through. The delivery of that message will depend as much upon your ability to operate your radio as it will your skill in transmitting the information. In not so extreme way, understand that people are depending on you to communicate on their behalf. Although humor and enjoyment are part of this hobby, it pays to take the exercises, training nets, and our weekly nets seriously.

Listening

A huge part of communicating is a sound ability (pardon the pun) to listen to what is being said. Some experts claim that listening is more than 50% of our communication. Where we often cannot see all of the non-verbal language, listening to what is actually said becomes even more important.

Sometimes the job of listening is complicated by a list of noise distractions. You might be operating from a noisy location, the signal might be weak or other stations may be causing interference. In each case, it helps to have headphones to minimize local noise and help you concentrate on the radio signal.

Study the situation by listening. Then listen—listen—listen some more. You can learn a lot just by observing.

Microphone techniques

Using your microphone correctly can make a big difference in how well you are understood when you do talk. Ideally, hold your microphone about 2 inches from your mouth and speak across it, not directly into it. This will reduce the breath noises and popping sounds that can mask or distort your speech. Work with an Elmer to adjust the gain of your microphone.

Voice Operated Transmission (or VOX) is not recommended for emergency communication. It is too easy for background noise and off-air operator comments to be accidentally transmitted resulting in embarrassment or a disrupted net. Use a hand or foot switch instead.

Brevity

Each communication should consist of only the information necessary to get the message across clearly and accurately. Extra information can distract the recipient and lead to misinterpretation and confusion. In addition, on an emergency net, time is of the essence. Every second you spend sending extraneous information is another second that a higher priority message has to wait.

We can practice brevity on our weekly nets. In fact, that is the place to practice and to get into the habit. State only the information that is asked for by Net Control. Strive for efficiency – make it a personal goal to give as much information with as few words as possible.

Blaise Pascal once wrote, “I would have written a shorter letter if I had had more time.” It is difficult to make a message short. Take time before transmitting to think about what you are going to say. Even writing down a few key words can go a long way to keeping our thoughts organized as we express them verbally.

Clarity

There is a line between being too brief and sacrificing the clarity of the message. So here are a few suggestions to help with clarity.

- Avoid contractions. The word “is” can be easily confused with “isn’t”.
- Do not editorialize or engage in chit chat. There are other times and place for that aspect of amateur radio.
- Use specific words to ensure that your precise meaning is conveyed. Do not say, “that place we were talking about,” when “Adam’s School” is what you really mean.

As hams, we use a great deal of jargon and specialized terminology in our daily conversations. Most of the time we understand each other and on those occasions when we do not, it makes little difference. However, in an emergency, the results can be much different. A misunderstood message could cost someone’s life.

In an emergency, it is important that all messages and communications use common terminology, otherwise known as “plain language”. Q signals, except in Morse code, should be avoided. 10-codes should never be used on ham bands. Memorize the ITU phonetic alphabet and use it when appropriate, especially when sending proper nouns in formal messages.

Self-Control

Whether you are operating as Net Control or simply relaying a message from your stake president, it is crucial to maintain a heightened level of self-control.

It is difficult to control your emotions during an emotional situation. Emotions are contagious. If you emotions and subsequently, your tone of voice are elevated or panicked, others will senses it and react to it. Before keying the microphone, take a deep breath – two, if you need to, and then calmly transmit the information. Be aware, also, that the speed at which you speak can also affect the clarity of your message. Slowing down may seem counter-intuitive, but receiving the message accurately the first time slowly may take far less time than having to repeat the content several times.

Miscellaneous

Finally, I would just add this little lesson that I recently learned. Pay attention to band plans. Last week I proposed a frequency for the FSQ net that violated the 2 meter band plan. A kind operator pointed it out. I don't recall who that was, but I am grateful. I personally want to operate the best I can, and I welcome the feedback. In the future, I'll pay closer attention to the mode I'm using and where in the band I'm using it.

Wrap-Up

Are there questions or comments from any net participants? If so, feel free to call now with your call sign, phonetically.

Conclusion

This concludes tonight's training. Again, strive for excellence. 73 to the net. This is N7TMS back to Net Control.