



Communication Skills

Communication happens all around us, and it's more than mere words. Communication comprises the messages and signals we send to others as well as the ones we receive. Our verbal words are only a small percentage of the message that's communicated. Our nonverbal signals, such as tone, eye contact and body language, make up the rest.

Every day is an opportunity to grow in our verbal and nonverbal skills. When we interact with our families, friends, coworkers and even strangers, we encounter values and opinions different from our own. How we react and respond to these differences can sharpen our communication skills.

Communication Tips

Just like exercising improves our overall physical health, good communication is a muscle that needs stretching. The more you practice, the better you will become. Even in conflict, there's an opportunity to grow as a communicator. The following guidelines will help you improve your verbal, nonverbal and listening skills:

Verbal Communication

Stay current – Sometimes it can be tempting to bring up past wrongs or grievances in a conversation. This tends to make the listener feel defensive and shut down. Stay in the present and only discuss the current issue. It can be helpful to write down your main points to keep yourself on task.

Use "I" statements – Statements that start with "I" instead of "you" will keep the other person from feeling attacked. For example, "I felt upset when you didn't return my call." This keeps the focus on you and your feelings about the present situation.

Avoid trigger words – Words such as "always" and "never" are not helpful in conversation. For example, "You never come home on time," is much different than, "I feel angry when you don't arrive home on time." Trigger words have an accusatory tone, igniting unwanted emotions in the conversation.

Nonverbal Communication

Make eye contact – People know you're interested when you make good eye contact, as it communicates value. They will also be more likely to hear what you are saying. Be mindful though, as some cultures have different norms when it comes to eye contact.

Be consistent – Keep your nonverbal signals consistent. Your words, facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures should all be sending the same message. Saying the words, "I love you," while rolling your eyes and slouching is inconsistent. Mixed signals create conflict.

Listening Skills

Practice good listening – Avoid interrupting the other speaker or simply biding your time until it's your turn to speak. Instead, consider what values you might have in common and which ones are different. Finding similarities or shared interests increases sensitivity.

Be empathetic – Put yourself in the other's shoes by practicing active listening. This style of listening, also known as empathic listening, seeks to understand the thoughts and feelings behind the words. When we're empathic, we respect the other's feelings and display patience and honesty.

Help for Difficult Conversations

No one is exempt from conflict, and all relationships will experience disagreement. Improving your communication skills will help you navigate through a potentially challenging conversation.

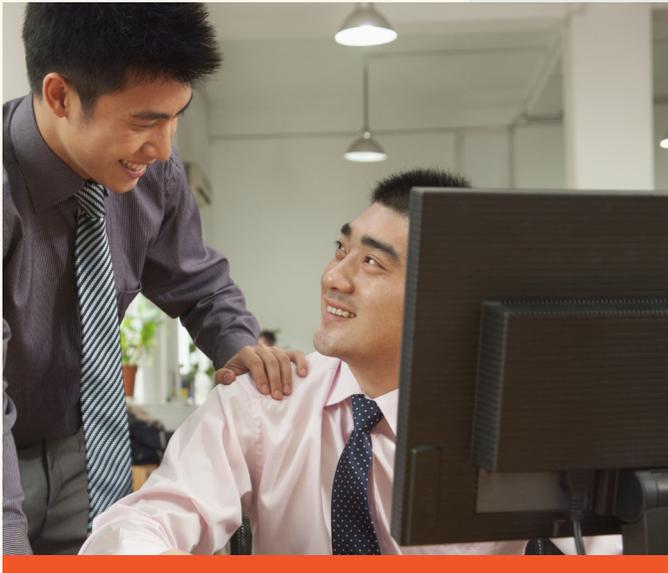
Avoid being passive-aggressive – Never use a third person as a messenger when a face-to-face conversation is needed. Also, avoid writing out a message that should take place in person. Trying to ignore the issue or the person

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will only cause emotions to flare and delay a possible solution. Masking your thoughts in sarcasm or insults is not communicating your message with honesty and authenticity.

Practice self-awareness – Consider why you feel the way you do. If you are not aware of your own emotions and opinions, you won't be able to communicate them with confidence and clarity. And if you've had a stressful day, don't direct those emotions towards the person with whom you are communicating.

Grow from criticism – It's easy to become defensive when someone critiques or attacks us verbally. However, lashing out in return won't solve anything. Instead, listen to what they are saying and consider their feelings. What is your responsibility regarding the information they shared? It's possible to grow from someone's insights even if presented in an unfair way. Weigh the information and then decide if you should accept or ignore it.



Take a break – Every problem may not be resolved in one conversation. It's easy for our emotions to take over when we communicate, but it's important to stay calm and use our best thinking when we talk. Taking a quick "time out" or a few minutes to cool down can help us respond neutrally rather than react aggressively.

Ask for help – Some conversations can become heated quickly. Having a mediator or therapist can help each person feel heard, and the presence of this third party can also keep emotions from escalating.

Conflict and disagreement are inevitable in life, but communication is possible no matter what the circumstance. Every day provides new situations to practice our communication skills, so take opportunities when you see them to grow as an individual.

Sources:

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Teamwork: You and Your Co-Workers

Chances are during the work week, you spend more time with co-workers than you do with your family and friends. Depending on your relationships, co-workers can make your workday better or worse.

Having casual friends at work and membership on an informal team can have many advantages. Teamwork can:

- Create a supportive work environment;
- Inspire new goals and job improvement;
- Encourage development of new skills;
- Develop self-esteem;
- Provide solutions for work-related problems; and
- Increase morale.

Co-worker relationships can also have a negative impact on your job. They can:

- Decrease job productivity by socializing too much; and
- Create cliques that exclude others and encourage favoritism.

Finding the right balance is critical to reap the rewards of co-worker relationships. This article will help you create a healthy and supportive informal team, work out co-worker problems and manage friendships at work.

Encourage a Teamwork Environment

Many managers and supervisors labor to create and nurture teams in jobs that require close interaction and trust. Even if your job does not rely on this type of interaction, you can still benefit from being a member of a team. If you work together, you already have something in common, but there is still more to learn. To foster a team environment:

- Plan to get to know each other outside of work. Because there is little time to socialize aside from lunch hours, talk with your co-workers about meeting after work and/or participating in a mini-retreat;
- Learn about your co-workers' positions and duties. In understanding their duties in conjunction with yours, you learn how to help each other on the job and work together;

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- Make meetings outside of work casual and fun. Separate yourself from any work grievances. The goal is to develop a positive atmosphere, not gossip or vent; and
- Ask your supervisor about team-building workshops or retreats that are available.

Improving Co-Worker Relations

Though you are not expected to form friendships with your co-workers, a healthy work environment is contingent on healthy co-worker relations. If you notice that you and a co-worker are experiencing unspoken or underlying conflicts, address them immediately. Working as a team and feeling a part of this team requires members to respect, listen, understand and trust each other. Here are some steps to help you improve strained co-worker relations.

- Recognize that your goal is to create a healthy co-worker relationship. Focus on learning how to work together, not forcing unnatural friendships.
- Agree to disagree. You and your co-worker need to learn to deal constructively with your differences and disagreements.
- Improve communication. Talk with your co-worker about different ways to communicate and treat each other. Take into consideration each other's differences and work styles.
- Build mutual understanding. Do this by talking about a problem you have with each other from different angles. Discuss perceptions of what is going on and why.

Directly discuss your problems. It is easy to take a passive-aggressive approach when dealing with conflict, but the problem is likely to grow larger.

By establishing a healthy work relationship with your co-worker, you open the door for future negotiations and encourage a healthy and supportive work environment.

Creating Friendships at Work

Healthy co-worker relations naturally foster teamwork and support, and sometimes these co-worker bonds can move to friendships.

Dr. Jan Yager, sociologist and author of several books about friendships, recommends that friendship at work be "casual." Casual friendships are genuine friendships but develop to a less personal, familiar level. These friendships allow you to enjoy the company of your co-workers without jeopardizing professionalism.

If you are interested in changing a work-related acquaintance to a friendship, suggest doing activities that are not work-related, such as going to a movie or dinner. In these environments, conversation naturally shifts from work to new or shared interests.

Casual friendships make work more fun and enjoyable. Co-worker friendships can provide camaraderie, inspiration and social outlets. They can help you:

- Brainstorm for ideas;
- Laugh during times of stress;
- Create contacts in the company; and
- Inspire career growth and development.

There are some rules for maintaining casual friendships at work.

- Be an active listener;
- Show interest in your friend's personal problems as well as business interests and concerns.
- Remember your friend on holidays. You don't necessarily have to purchase gifts, but you can send a card.
- Don't share your friend's confidences at work and consider carefully what you share with others.
- Keep updated on your friend's life and keep him aware of your changes.
- Talk about the friendship if you sense that it is putting either of your jobs in jeopardy.
- Find out if your company has a policy about work friendships or interactions. Follow the rules.

Words of Caution

It is comforting to have a friend nearby when you are stressed or concerned about a project, but there are downfalls in co-worker friendships. Keep these suggestions in mind.

- Limit gossiping and forming cliques. You and your friends want to encourage a positive work environment. Remember, any kind of exclusion destroys a healthy team atmosphere.
- Keep your friend's work position in mind. If you turn to your friend with work-related grievances you are placing him or her in a difficult position. Your friend may agree with you and want to support you, but by sharing certain problems you may implicate him or her in your problems.
- Be professional at work. Be conscious of how your interactions affect your work and those around you.
- Socialize during non-work hours. Although you may be tempted to tell your co-worker about the exciting events of the weekend, be aware of your

work boundaries and what is appropriate. Keep your personal issues on personal time and work issues on work time.

Conclusion

Some people consider their co-workers their second family because of the substantial time they spend with them. Because working in an environment that is healthy and nurturing may influence job satisfaction or dissatisfaction, work with your co-workers to encourage a supportive team environment.

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How to be Happy: Tips for Cultivating Contentment

Are you tired of waiting around for happiness to find you? Stop waiting and start getting happy with these tips.

Do you know how to be happy? Or are you waiting for happiness to find you?

Despite what the fairy tales depict, happiness doesn't appear by magic. It's not even something that happens to you. It's something you can cultivate.

So, what are you waiting for? Start discovering how to be happy.

How to be happy: What science tells us

Only 10 percent or so of the variation in people's reports of happiness can be explained by differences in their circumstances. It appears that the bulk of what determines happiness is due to personality and – more importantly – thoughts and behaviors that can be changed.

So, yes, you can learn how to be happy – or at least happier.

Although you may have thought, as many people do, that happiness comes from being born rich or beautiful or living a stress-free life, the reality is that people who have wealth, beauty or less stress are not happier on average than those of who don't enjoy those blessings.

People who are happy seem to intuitively know that their happiness is the sum of their life choices, and their lives are built on the following pillars:

- Devoting time to family and friends;
- Appreciating what they have;
- Maintaining an optimistic outlook;
- Feeling a sense of purpose; and
- Living in the moment.

How to be happy: Practice, practice, practice

If you have been looking for happiness, the good news is that your choices, thoughts and actions can influence your level of happiness. It's not as easy as flipping a switch, but you can turn up your happiness level. Here is how to get started on the path to creating a happier you.

Invest in relationships

Surround yourself with happy people. Being around people who are content buoys your own mood. And by being happy yourself, you give something back to those around you.

Friends and family help you celebrate life's successes and support you in difficult times. Although it's easy to take friends and family for granted, these relationships need nurturing.

Build up your emotional account with kind words and actions. Be careful and gracious with critique. Let people know that you appreciate what they do for you or even just that you're glad they're part of your life.

Express gratitude

Gratitude is more than saying thank you. It's a sense of wonder, appreciation and, yes, thankfulness for life. It's easy to go through life without recognizing your good fortune. Often, it takes a serious illness or other tragic event to jolt people into appreciating the good things in their lives. Don't wait for something like that to happen to you.

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Make a commitment to practice gratitude. Each day identify at least one thing that enriches your life. When you find yourself thinking an ungrateful thought, try substituting a grateful one. For example, replace "my sister forgot my birthday" with "my sister has always been there for me in tough times."

Let gratitude be the last thought before you go to sleep. Let gratitude also be your first thought when you wake up in the morning.

Cultivate optimism

Develop the habit of seeing the positive side of things. You needn't become a Pollyanna – after all, bad things do happen. It would be silly to pretend otherwise. But you don't have to let the negatives color your whole outlook on life. Remember that what is right about you almost always trumps what is wrong.

If you're not an optimistic person by nature, it may take time for you to change your pessimistic thinking. Start by recognizing negative thoughts as you have them. Then take a step back and ask yourself these key questions:

- Is the situation really as bad as I think?
- Is there another way to look at the situation?
- What can I learn from this experience that I can use in the future?

Find your purpose

People who strive to meet a goal or fulfill a mission – whether it's growing a garden, caring for children or finding one's spirituality – are happier than those who don't have such aspirations.

Having a goal provides a sense of purpose, bolsters self-esteem and brings people together. What your goal is doesn't matter as much as whether the process of working toward it is meaningful to you.

Try to align your daily activities with the long-term meaning and purpose of your life. Research studies suggest that relationships provide the strongest meaning and purpose to your life. So cultivate meaningful relationships.

Are you engaged in something you love? If not, ask yourself these questions to discover how you can find your purpose:

- What excites and energizes me?
- What are my proudest achievements?
- How do I want others to remember me?



Live in the moment

Don't postpone joy waiting for a day when your life is less busy or less stressful. That day may never come. Instead, look for opportunities to savor the small pleasures of everyday life. Focus on the positives in the present moment, instead of dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.

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