

5 Keys to Clear Communication

The pace and complexity of the modern work environment has increased dramatically over the past two decades, and effective interpersonal communication skills are more important than ever as teams of executives, managers and employees try to work together under the pressure of shorter deadlines, faster competition and continuous change.

But many people lack the communication skills necessary to be fully effective in this difficult environment. Interpersonal communication, even under the best of circumstances, is an imperfect, error-prone process. When faced with challenging situations, many employees become frustrated and communicate LESS, not more, which only exacerbates the issue.

QUICK TIPS

5 key elements of clear communication:

Observation: Describe the relevant facts, with no judgment or blame.

Emotion: Express clearly and specifically how this makes you feel.

Interpretation: Explain why the observed facts make you feel the way you do.

Request for action: State what you want in specific, positive terms.

Mutual Benefits: Describe the specific win/win results of your desired outcome.

Any time one person listens to another, the listener is essentially trying to reconstruct the speaker's thoughts, experiences and perceptions. This is complicated by the fact that everything is filtered through the listener's own thoughts, experiences and perceptions.

To minimize the likelihood of misunderstanding, in any important communication in a business environment, the speaker should include 5 key elements that will help the listener mentally "reconstruct" the speaker's true meaning:

1. Observation

Begin by stating what you are seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing. Begin with "just the facts" as you have observed them, avoiding generalizations such as "you always..." or "you never..." and being specific about place, time, how often, etc. Describe rather than diagnose, avoiding words that label or judge the actions you observe.

So instead of saying "Are you EVER going to get a monthly report to me in time?" you would observe "I haven't received the monthly report that was due last week, and this is the fifth time it's been late."

2. Emotion

After making an objective statement of your observations, then it's appropriate to express how this makes you feel. Use specific emotion descriptors such as glad, angry, delighted, sad, afraid, resentful, embarrassed, calm, enthusiastic, concerned, delighted, etc.

But avoid words that imply the action of another person: "I feel...ignored, manipulated, mistreated, dominated, used, cheated," etc. Notice how these words indirectly blame the listener for the speaker's emotions. In order to help your listener understand what you are feeling, translate these "implied blame" words into an explicitly named emotion.

For example: "I'm feeling like you're not carrying your share of the work load around here" could be expressed more productively as "I'm concerned about this because it's a recurring issue."

3. Interpretation

After observing the facts and expressing your feelings, then you should provide your interpretation; an explanation of WHY you have the feelings you do. A common cause of miscommunication is different interpretations of the same events, which lead to different emotional responses.

So in order for the listener to fully appreciate and understand the emotions you've expressed, they need to also understand your interpretation of the events. Express your interpretation with phrases like "because I imagine that..." or "because I take that to mean ..." rather than phrases that assign blame such as "because YOU didn't ..." or "because YOU said."

Example: "Because it seems like I can never depend on you" would be more effectively stated as "because we all depend on each other, and I want us all to be as productive as possible."

4. Request for Action

The next step is to clearly request action, which may be in terms of information given, commitment made or a specific act to be completed. Since most people cannot produce emotions on request, it is generally not productive to ask a person for an emotion ("I want you to cheer up." "I want you to be as concerned about this as project as I am.")

If your want is general, ask for a specific step toward it. Translate open-ended requests, such as for "consideration, respect, help, understanding, support" etc., into specific action verbs such as please "listen, complete, tell me, " etc. State your want in specific positive terms: "Please be on time" rather than "Don't be late." Include when, where, how. Including the details can help you to avoid big misunderstandings.

5. Mutual Benefits

The final key is to clearly state the positive results of the requested action, information or commitment. In describing the specific positive results of acting upon your request, you allow the other person to become motivated by feeling capable of giving something worthwhile.

This prepares the ground for later expressions of appreciation, and points your relationship toward mutual appreciation and the exercise of competence, rather than guilt, duty, obedience or resentment. For example: “ I know we both want the same thing really, and I think this will help us get it.”

A Final Example

You’re fifteen minutes into an important business meeting when one of the other project team members arrives late. You’re incredibly frustrated, but you wait until the first break to take this person aside and whisper furiously “What’s going on with you? You’ve been late to practically every meeting for the past two months?”

While your frustration is probably valid and understandable, it’s not likely to get you what you ultimately want: assurance that the project will be completed as required. So you might instead try this approach:

“I’ve noticed over the past several weeks you’ve been late to most of our meetings (observation) and I’m concerned about you and the team (emotion) because it may mean that you’re either overloaded or distracted (interpretation). I’d like to know why you’ve been late, and work with you to come up with a plan to address the issue proactively (request for action) because we value your contribution and having you as a team member we can count on is good for all of us, including you.”

Sometimes the Longer Road is Faster

Some individuals will initially find that expressing themselves this thoughtfully and carefully is frustrating because it appears to take longer than their usual quick style of communication, and it seems to them that some of this should be obvious to the listener (You mean I have TELL them I’m frustrated!?) But if you include all the time it takes to unscramble everyday misunderstandings, and to work through the feelings that usually accompany not being understood, expressing yourself more completely this way can actually take a lot less time and have a tremendously positive impact on group productivity.