



Effective Communication

Improving Communication Skills in Your Work and Personal Relationships



Effective communication is the glue that helps deepen your connections to others and improve teamwork, problem solving, and your social and emotional health. But all too often, what we try to communicate goes astray. We say one thing, the other person hears something else, and misunderstandings, frustration, and conflicts ensue. But whether you're trying to improve communication with your spouse, kids, boss, or coworkers, you can learn the skills to interact more effectively, improve your relationships, and build greater trust and respect with others.

What is effective communication?

Effective communication is about more than just exchanging information. It's about understanding the emotion and intentions behind the information. As well as being able to clearly convey a message, you need to also listen in a way that gains the full meaning of what's being said, builds trust, and makes the other person feel heard and understood.

More than just the words you use, effective communication combines a set of 4 skills:

1. Engaged listening
2. Nonverbal communication
3. Managing stress in the moment
4. Asserting yourself in a respectful way

While these are learned skills, communication is more effective when it's spontaneous rather than formulaic. A speech that is read, for example, rarely has the same impact as a speech that's delivered (or appears to be delivered) spontaneously. Of course, it takes time and effort to develop these skills and become an effective communicator. The more effort and practice you put in, the more instinctive and spontaneous your communication skills will become.

Effective communication skill 1: Become an engaged listener

People often focus on what they should say, but effective communication is less about talking and more about listening. Listening well means not just understanding the words or the information being communicated, but also understanding the emotions the speaker is trying to communicate.

There's a big difference between engaged listening and simply hearing. When you really listen—when you're engaged with what's being said—you'll hear the subtle intonations in someone's voice that tell you how that person is feeling and the emotions they're trying to communicate. When you're an engaged listener, not only will you better understand the other person, you'll also make that person feel heard and understood, which can help build a stronger, deeper connection between you.

By communicating in this way, you'll also experience a process that lowers stress and supports physical and emotional well-being. If the person you're talking to is calm, for example, listening in an engaged way will help to calm you, too. Similarly, if the person is agitated, you can help calm them by listening in an attentive way and making the person feel understood.

If your goal is to fully understand and connect with the other person, listening in an engaged way will often come naturally. If it doesn't, try the following tips. The more you practice them, the more satisfying and rewarding your interactions with others will become.

How do you become an engaged listener?

Focus fully on the speaker. You can't communicate effectively when you're multitasking. If you're daydreaming, checking your phone, or thinking about something else, you're almost certain to miss nonverbal cues in the conversation. You need to stay focused on the moment-to-moment experience. If you find it hard to concentrate on some speakers, try repeating their words over in your head—it'll reinforce their message and help you stay focused.

How do you become an engaged listener?

Favor your right ear. As strange as it sounds, the left side of the brain contains the primary processing centers for both speech comprehension and emotions. Since the left side of the brain is connected to the right side of the body, favoring your right ear can help you better detect the emotional nuances of what someone is saying.

Avoid interrupting or trying to redirect the conversation to your concerns, by saying something like, “If you think that’s bad, let me tell you what happened to me.” Listening is not the same as waiting for your turn to talk. You can’t concentrate on what someone’s saying if you’re forming what you’re going to say next. Often, the speaker can read your facial expressions and know that your mind’s elsewhere.

Show your interest in what's being said. Nod occasionally, smile at the person, and make sure your posture is open and inviting. Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like “yes” or “uh huh.”

Try to set aside judgment. In order to communicate effectively with someone, you don’t have to like them or agree with their ideas, values, or opinions. However, you do need to set aside your judgment and withhold blame and criticism in order to fully understand them. The most difficult communication, when successfully executed, can lead to an unlikely connection with someone.

Provide feedback. If there seems to be a disconnect, reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. “What I’m hearing is,” or “Sounds like you are saying,” are great ways to reflect back. Don’t simply repeat what the speaker has said verbatim, though—you’ll sound insincere or unintelligent. Instead, express what the speaker’s words mean to you. Ask questions to clarify certain points: “What do you mean when you say…” or “Is this what you mean?”

Hear the emotion behind the words

It’s the higher frequencies of human speech that impart emotion. You can become more attuned to these frequencies—and thus better able to understand what others are really saying—by exercising the tiny muscles of your middle ear (the smallest in the body). Try singing, playing a wind instrument, or listening to certain types of high-frequency music (a Mozart symphony or violin concerto, for example, rather than low-frequency rock, pop, or hip-hop).

Skill 2: Pay attention to nonverbal signals

The way you look, listen, move, and react to another person tells them more about how you're feeling than words alone ever can. Nonverbal communication, or body language, includes facial expressions, body movement and gestures, eye contact, posture, the tone of your voice, and even your muscle tension and breathing. The way you look, listen, move, and react to another person tells them more about how you're feeling than words alone ever can.

Developing the ability to understand and use nonverbal communication can help you connect with others, express what you really mean, navigate challenging situations, and build better relationships at home and work.

- ▶ You can enhance effective communication by using open body language—arms uncrossed, standing with an open stance or sitting on the edge of your seat, and maintaining eye contact with the person you're talking to.
- ▶ You can also use body language to emphasize or enhance your verbal message—patting a friend on the back while complimenting him on his success, for example, or pounding your fists to underline your message.

Tips for improving how you read nonverbal communication

Be aware of individual differences. People from different countries and cultures tend to use different nonverbal communication gestures, so it's important to take age, culture, religion, gender, and emotional state into account when reading body language signals. An American teen, a grieving widow, and an Asian businessman, for example, are likely to use nonverbal signals differently.

Look at nonverbal communication signals as a group. Don't read too much into a single gesture or nonverbal cue. Consider all of the nonverbal signals you receive, from eye contact to tone of voice to body language. Anyone can slip up occasionally and let eye contact slip, for example, or briefly cross their arms without meaning to. Consider the signals as a whole to get a better "read" on a person.

Tips for improving how you deliver nonverbal communication

Use nonverbal signals that match up with your words. Nonverbal communication should reinforce what is being said, not contradict it. If you say one thing, but your body language says something else, your listener will likely feel you're being dishonest. For example, you can't say "yes" while shaking your head no.

Adjust your nonverbal signals according to the context. The tone of your voice, for example, should be different when you're addressing a child than when you're addressing a group of adults. Similarly, take into account the emotional state and cultural background of the person you're interacting with.

Use body language to convey positive feelings even when you're not actually experiencing them. If you're nervous about a situation—a job interview, important presentation, or first date, for example—you can use positive body language to signal confidence, even though you're not feeling it. Instead of tentatively entering a room with your head down, eyes averted, and sliding into a chair, try standing tall with your shoulders back, smiling and maintaining eye contact, and delivering a firm handshake. It will make you feel more self-confident and help to put the other person at ease.

Avoid negative body language. If you disagree with or dislike what's being said, you may use negative body language to rebuff the other person's message, such as crossing your arms, avoiding eye contact, or tapping your feet. You don't have to agree, or even like what's being said, but to communicate effectively without making the other person defensive, it's important to avoid sending negative signals.

Skill 3: Keep stress in check

To communicate effectively, you need to be aware of and in control of your emotions. And that means learning how to manage stress. When you're stressed or emotionally overwhelmed, you're more likely to misread other people, send confusing or off-putting nonverbal signals, and lapse into unhealthy knee-jerk patterns of behavior.

How many times have you felt stressed during a disagreement with your spouse, kids, boss, friends, or coworkers and then said or done something you later regretted? If you can quickly relieve stress and return to a calm state, you'll not only avoid such regrets, but in many cases you'll also help to calm the other person as well. It's only when you're in a calm, relaxed state that you'll be able to know whether the situation requires a response, or whether the other person's signals indicate it would be better to remain silent.

In situations such as a job interview, business presentation, high-pressure meeting, or introduction to a loved one's family, for example, it's important to manage your emotions, think on your feet, and effectively communicate under pressure.

Tips for staying calm under pressure

Use stalling tactics to give yourself time to think. . Ask for a question to be repeated or for clarification of a statement before you respond.

Tips for staying calm under pressure

Pause to collect your thoughts. Silence isn't necessarily a bad thing—pausing can make you seem more in control than rushing your response.

Make one point and provide an example or supporting piece of information. If your response is too long or you waffle about a number of points, you risk losing the listener's interest. Follow one point with an example and then gauge the listener's reaction to tell if you should make a second point.

Deliver your words clearly. In many cases, how you say something can be as important as what you say. Speak clearly, maintain an even tone, and make eye contact. Keep your body language relaxed and open.

Wrap up with a summary and then stop. Summarize your response and then stop talking, even if it leaves a silence in the room. You don't have to fill the silence by continuing to talk.

Quick stress relief for effective communication

When things start to get heated in a conversation, you need something quick and immediate to bring down the emotional intensity. By learning to quickly reduce stress in the moment, you can safely face any strong emotions you're experiencing, regulate your feelings, and behave appropriately.

Recognize when you're becoming stressed. Your body will let you know if you're stressed as you communicate. Are your muscles or your stomach tight? Are your hands clenched? Is your breath shallow? Are you "forgetting" to breathe?

Take a moment to calm down before deciding to continue a conversation or postpone it.

Bring your senses to the rescue. The best way to rapidly and reliably relieve stress is through the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, movement, or smell. For example, you could pop a peppermint in your mouth, squeeze something in your pocket, take a few deep breaths, clench and relax your muscles, or simply recall a soothing, sensory-rich image. Each person responds differently to sensory input, so you need to find things that are soothing to you.

Look for humor in the situation. When used appropriately, humor is a great way to relieve stress when communicating. When you or those around you start taking things too seriously, find a way to lighten the mood by sharing a joke or amusing story.

Be willing to compromise. Sometimes, if you can both bend a little, you'll be able to find a happy middle ground that reduces the stress levels for everyone concerned. If you realize that the other person cares much more about something than you do, compromise may be easier for you and a good investment in the future of the relationship.

Agree to disagree, if necessary, and take time away from the situation so everyone can calm down. Go for a stroll outside if possible, or spend a few minutes meditating. Physical movement or finding a quiet place to regain your balance can quickly reduce stress.

Skill 4: Assert yourself

Direct, assertive expression makes for clear communication and can help boost self-esteem and decision-making. Being assertive means expressing your thoughts, feelings, and needs in an open and honest way, while standing up for yourself and respecting others. It does NOT mean being hostile, aggressive, or demanding. Effective communication is always about understanding the other person, not about winning an argument or forcing your opinions on others.

To improve your assertiveness:

Value yourself and your options. They are as important as anyone else's.

Know your needs and wants. Learn to express them without infringing on the rights of others

Express negative thoughts in a positive way. It's OK to be angry, but you must be respectful as well.

Receive feedback positively. Accept compliments graciously, learn from your mistakes, ask for help when needed.

Learn to say "no." Know your limits and don't let others take advantage of you. Look for alternatives so everyone feels good about the outcome.

Developing assertive communication techniques

Empathetic assertion conveys sensitivity to the other person. First, recognize the other person's situation or feelings, then state your needs or opinion. "I know you've been very busy at work, but I want you to make time for us as well."

Escalating assertion can be used when your first attempts are not successful. You become increasingly firm as time progresses, which may include outlining consequences if your needs are not met. For example, "If you don't abide by the contract, I'll be forced to pursue legal action."

Practice assertiveness in lower risk situations to start with to help build up your confidence. Or ask friends or family if you can practice assertiveness techniques on them first.

More help for relationships and communication

Conflict Resolution Skills: (</articles/relationships-communication/conflict-resolution-skills.htm>) Building the Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities

Managing Conflicts with Humor: (</articles/relationships-communication/managing-conflicts-with-humor.htm>) Using Laughter to Strengthen Your Relationships and Resolve Disagreements

Nonverbal Communication: (</articles/relationships-communication/nonverbal-communication.htm>) Improving Your Nonverbal Skills and Reading Body Language

Authors: Lawrence Robinson, Jeanne Segal, Ph. D., and Melinda Smith, M.A. Last updated: May 2017.

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