

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Communicating During Times of Change at Work

Communicating well is always a challenge. But during changing times, it can be even harder. People tend to be less trusting of others and to feel less secure and more stressed when their work environment is changing. All of this can cause communication problems and misunderstandings. Here are some suggestions on positive communication during times of workplace change.

Communicating with your manager

Often we don't know how change at work—a company restructure, a new manager coming in, for example—will affect our jobs and our lives. So, we worry and may jump to conclusions such as these:

- "With the reorganization, I'll have to do more work."
- "I'll never learn the new procedures."
- "I'll never be able to do this and my old job."
- "Now I'll have to move to another office."

The sooner you can find out from your manager how your job will be affected, the easier it will be for you to adapt and help. Your manager may not have all the answers to your questions, but it's important to let your manager know about your concerns.

Ask for coaching or training if necessary. Even the most capable employees need additional training and help to meet new job demands and learn new systems and procedures.

Discuss any additional tools or resources you may need in order to meet new or changing work goals. Ask for the support and tools you need to excel in your job. For example, you might ask your manager to review how to handle new forms or processes.

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Communicating with co-workers

Good relationships with co-workers can help build trust that will see you through uncertain times.

Build positive relationships with co-workers. Get to know people. Pick up the phone to chat. Make time for coffee or lunch with co-workers, even if it's a virtual coffee break by phone or a video chat with someone who works from home.

Praise a job well done. When you notice good work, tell your co-worker what a great job he or she did. Even managers appreciate sincere positive feedback.
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Avoid adding to the rumour mill. Rumours spread quickly during times of change. That's because when things are unclear, people tend to read into the situation and fear the worst. Some of the rumours often heard during times of workplace change include:

- "We're going to lose our jobs."
- "The company's going to be sold."
- "The plant's going to close."
- "They're bringing in new management and firing all of us."

Be skeptical about what you hear. Don't communicate about the company or trust information you receive via social media. Nevertheless, you may see troubling news items about your company online. Ask for your manager's help in separating fact from fiction or identifying fake news. Go to your manager or someone reliable who has access to the right information and try to confirm what's true and what isn't. Remember that management may not have all the answers. Sometimes, such as when a company is being sold or acquired, few people may know all the facts.

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Resolving communication problems at work

When the pace at work is hurried and people feel uncertain, we often have shorter fuses. We may become less civil. We can forget to update each other. Here are some strategies to avoid misunderstandings and strained relationships at work:

Assume positive intent. Expect misunderstandings to arise in times of change. Take them for what they often are: miscommunication between well-meaning co-workers, who are trying to do a good job.

Resolve ongoing problems as soon as you can. The longer you avoid discussing difficult issues, the harder they may become to fix.

Pinpoint what the problem is. Are you frustrated because your new manager has a different style of managing from your old one? Are you stressed because your co-worker isn't doing her share? Identify what's bothering you. Think about it carefully to clarify your concerns.

Set up a time to talk about the problem. This should be a planned meeting — not a quick talk in the hallway. You might say to your co-worker or manager, "I'd like to discuss an issue that's worrying me. Could we arrange a time to sit down and talk?"

Plan what you're going to say. You don't want to beat around the bush, but you do want the conversation to stay positive and focused. This is not a time to vent. So, prioritize. Write down what you want to say. Offer solutions and suggestions for fixing the problem. You can practice what you'll say ahead of time.

Be as specific as you can. Try to talk about the impact of the problem in a business context.

Make it clear from the start that your goal is to build a strong working relationship. If you're talking with your manager, you could begin by saying, "I'm glad we're talking, because I want to solve this problem that's been interfering with my work."

Describe the problem. Be as specific as you can. Try to talk about the impact of the problem in a business context. For example, if you're not being updated often enough, you may have given customers incorrect or outdated information.

Try to stay calm, not argumentative. When you keep cool and calm, you're in control and open to what others are saying.

Concentrate on being a careful listener. Careful listening is important whether you are handling a problem with a co-worker, having a discussion with your manager, or talking with a family member or friend. If you have a tendency to interrupt others, overcome it.

Use direct channels of communication. If you're angry with a co-worker, talk with her, not with other co-workers behind her back. Try to have important conversations face-to-face rather than by email or voice mail. You might begin the conversation by saying, "I'm having trouble with what happened yesterday. Is there a time when we can talk?" If the problem is bigger than you can handle yourself, your manager or a trusted co-worker might be able to give you valuable feedback.

If you say something at work that you later regret, follow up with a personal apology. If you've you lashed out in frustration at a co-worker, overreacted at a meeting, or criticized someone in front of others, an apology is in order. It's best to offer it privately and in person. It's OK to keep it simple. You might say, "I'm sorry I lost my temper yesterday. I didn't mean to."

Speak up if you have a concern. If a co-worker who is also under stress from workplace change has been rude or impatient, let him know that this bothered you, preferably soon after the event and in private. You might start the conversation by saying, "I felt uncomfortable yesterday when you corrected me in front of the customer. Could we agree to let each other know about changes when customers are not present?"

Remember to ask for a break if you think you are going to lose your patience or composure. It's alright to say, "I need a break" or "I'll need some time to think about this."

If a difficult situation at work persists, find someone to help you. You might find confidential help from your company's HR department, employee assistance program (EAP), a knowledgeable co-worker in another part of the organization, or someone outside the organization.

Turn to your family and friends for support. We often withdraw during times of crisis and change, when what we should be doing is staying connected with the people we care about and trust. Be open with your partner or spouse about what you're going through. Don't cut yourself off from friends and co-workers who could offer you the support you need. Most people want to help; sometimes they just need to know you would welcome their support.