

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

Workplace Communication

One of the key foundations of any successful workplace is being able to communicate effectively. It can help people receive and share information better, define and understand goals, and even avoid the negative effects of conflict and confusion. Studies also show that good communication can build rapport, enhance relationships, promote self-confidence and have a positive overall effect on the working environment.

Communication Basics

With a little effort and attention, you can learn how to relay and reinforce the importance of what you want to say, and encourage productive feedback from others. Once you begin practicing the basics of good communication, you'll quickly witness its positive effects and rewards on your working day. Below are a few tips to start you on the way to clear and effective communication.

Check your body language. Something as simple as how you sit or stand while communicating can have a profound effect on how people receive and respond to your message. For example, consider the unspoken signs we send out when we interact with others—relaxed hands with open palms are often associated with sincerity, whereas crossed arms are often associated with defensiveness or aggression.

So the next time you are in a conversation, think about the message your body may be communicating to the person you are speaking to. You can help communicate openness by keeping your arms relaxed and not crossed and your hands open and not clenched. Aggressive or impatient physical signals such as hands on hips or standing with your feet spread apart can contradict the sincerity and defeat the goal of what you are trying to say. You may be surprised at how a few simple non-verbal signals encourage people to accept what you are communicating.

Focus on the tone of your voice. How people perceive what you are saying can be impacted significantly by the tone of your voice. Think of how many ways you can say "yes" or "no"—you can express doubt, anger, indifference, or any range of emotions with either of these simple, short words. Try to keep an even and normal voice tone and volume—this will avoid any mixed messages and help people stay focused on your words and their meaning.

Avoid fidgeting when you speak. This will only draw attention away from what you have to say and reduce the impact of your message. Avoid excessive hand movements, playing with objects (such as a pen or a cup), constantly wringing your hands or frequent shuffling. To keep people focused on your message, try to remain relaxed, speak clearly and maintain eye contact.

Show interest. Try leaning forward slightly when listening to others. This shows interest in what the other person has to say and can be seen as a strong nonverbal cue indicating "straight talk."

Actively listen. This will ensure that communication remains clear. Try open questioning, gentle probing, and "checking in" periodically throughout the conversation to see if you've understood everything correctly. In any conversation it's important to show respect for co-workers' ideas by giving them your full attention while they speak, and not interrupting or finishing their sentences.

Paraphrase, reframe and summarize. It will help clarify expectations, address any misperceptions, and offer everyone a clearer understanding of what is being said.

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To paraphrase, use opening lines such as: "It sounds like." or "If I'm hearing you correctly." or "So what you're saying is." and then repeat what you've heard and understood in your own words. This will give everyone participating in the conversation a chance to measure where everyone stands and also whether or not what needs to be communicated has been done so successfully.

Mirror the body language of others. This shows that you are "in tune" or "in sync" with what the other person has to say. For example, if the person you are with leans forward or crosses their legs while speaking, try (discreetly) mimicking their body movements. Good communicators also use this technique to relax other people and make them feel "at home" during their conversation.

Respect the space of others. It's very appropriate to consider personal space and boundaries, when you are communicating face-to-face with another person. A good rule of thumb is to stand about an arm's length from others when talking. Standing too close can make people uncomfortable and standing too far away suggests that you may feel intimidated. Find a middle ground that makes everyone, including yourself, comfortable.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication is when you give yourself permission to express your needs, wants, feelings and opinions to others in a direct and honest manner. It's also about setting boundaries and communicating these boundaries to others.

Here are a few tips to try the next time you are engaged in a conversation and would like to assert yourself.

Use the "three-line assertion message". This is a three-step statement that helps provide clarity and understanding:

Step 1. You understand and summarize the facts of the situation.
Step 2. You indicate your feelings towards the situation.
Step 3. You state what you want from the situation.

Use assertive body language. It will increase the effectiveness of your statement. This includes: making eye contact; non-aggressive body signals such as maintaining a relaxed facial expression and sitting or standing upright with relaxed shoulders and arms; and breathing normally.

As you practice these tips keep in mind that being assertive doesn't mean being aggressive. Assertive communication is never intentionally hurtful. Aggressive communication, on the other hand, typically employs bullying tactics (such as name-calling, finger pointing or yelling) and is conducted with a disregard for the thoughts or feelings of others. The key to practicing assertiveness is to ensure that everyone feels respected and heard.

Communication to Resolve Conflicts

Most workplace conflicts are rooted in miscommunication. Try practicing the basics of good communication and applying assertiveness techniques with active listening skills—it can be an invaluable resource in difficult work situations when the pressure is really on. You'll find that this combination is an effective way to clear up any mixed messages or misunderstandings and address the cause of the conflict.

Here are a few other simple suggestions to help you manage your way through difficult encounters or conflicts:

- **Use "I" messages** such as "I sense," "I feel" and "I think," rather than accusatory messages such as "You said" and "You never (or always)…"

- **Avoid assuming or attributing motives** to the other person, or interpreting a disagreement as a personal attack.
- **Try to suspend judgment.** In learning another person's views, you may gain new insights and discover common ground.
- **Try to show appreciation** to the person for expressing their views.
- **Give yourself time to step away** if you are angry or upset, and suggest the discussion continue at a later date when both parties will be able to be focused and constructive.

As you begin to put these new techniques into practice, it’s important to remember that the meaning attributed to body language, gestures, space and tone can differ from culture to culture, and can be easily misinterpreted. If you are communicating across cultures it's best, where possible, to take the time to understand the nuances of the other person's communication style. And remember also, when you are speaking to anyone, to take individual personality styles into consideration.

Communication is not always easy, but, when you apply the basic rules of good communication, you will dramatically increase your chances of being understood and of understanding others. After all, that is what communication is all about.