

Effective Communication Tips

1. DETERMINE EXACTLY WHAT YOU ARE ADDRESSING. Are you dealing with an isolated event, a pattern of behavior or a relationship issue? A single incident, such as an employee being an hour late for work needs to be addressed, but not in the same way that you would deal with an employee who has clocked in an hour late three times over the course of one month. Also consider is the issue at hand related to a habitual pattern that is causing problems, or has something occurred over time that has soured a relationship that now needs to be repaired? The nature and severity of the issue will determine, in part, how the conversation should be framed and how it unfolds.

2. KNOW YOUR PURPOSE FOR HAVING THE CONVERSATION. When approaching what could be a challenging or confrontational dialogue, it's important to know why you're having the conversation and what you desire in terms of an outcome. Going into a discussion, ask yourself what you hope to accomplish. What is your intention or goal? Do you need a definitive answer on an issue? Is an apology in order or expected? Does clarity need to be brought to an issue that has become confused? Do you just need to clear the air? Stay focused on and true to the purpose of the conversation, even when your buttons are being pushed or emotions run high.

3. CHOOSE THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE. Trying to resolve a difficult issue when neither party can devote their full attention to the conversation (in the middle of a hectic day at work, for example) is a recipe for failure. Set aside enough time and choose an appropriate venue to engage in any demanding dialogue. At the outset of the conversation, ask if this is still a good time for the other person to talk. Gaining this "permission" commits both parties to the conversation. If, despite your best efforts, it becomes apparent during the course of the meeting that the timing really isn't right, be prepared to step back and address the issue later. Sometimes, retreating to neutral corners for a cooling-off period is the best path. Just don't stay in your own corner, hoping that the issue will somehow magically disappear.

4. MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT. It can be especially difficult to deal with anger, silence, tension or resistance on the part of a staff member or coworker. When someone you need to have a conversation with takes one of these stances, you may feel like you're in the dialogue alone. Dealing with an individual who is highly sensitive, defensive, or already "knows it all" also presents challenges. When these conditions are present, conversations can become emotionally charged in short order and result in an unsatisfactory resolution, or no resolution at all. To avoid having an encounter go south, do your part to maintain a positive environment. Use your best listening techniques, acknowledge what the other person is saying as they go along, and don't interrupt. If the conversation takes a negative or overly emotional turn, acknowledge that fact and try to direct that energy toward a useful purpose.

5. STRIVE FOR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING WITH HEIGHTENED AWARENESS. Engage your compassion gene at the highest possible level and remember that the challenging conversation is as difficult for the person you're speaking with as it is for you. Go in assuming that you have something to learn. Don't presume that you know what someone else thinks or how they feel in a given situation. Listen carefully, ask questions, and observe your own thoughts as they pass through your mind over the course of the conversation. Stay fully present.

6. SEPARATE EVIDENCE FROM INTERPRETATION. Having a fruitful conversation requires that all parties involved understand what is being discussed. In a conversation with your collections team, for example, are you addressing the fact the collections have been down for three months running, or your general sense that the business is not holding its own financially? Or with a team member who questions whether they're getting the support or information from you they need, are you talking about objective data, or a feeling on the part of the individual that their expectations are not being met? Getting to the core of an issue by separating fact from perception early on during a conversation will result in a more successful (not to mention shorter) dialogue.

7. QUESTION THE QUESTION. What does a coworker really want to know when they raise a challenging question or concern? Don't assume you fully understand the nature of a question just because you've heard some variation of it hundreds of times before. Before getting too far into a conversation, and especially before coming to conclusions, dig a little deeper by saying, "Tell me a little more about that" or by simply keeping silent for a few seconds to allow the other person to elaborate. Often times, there is an important or sensitive issue underlying what is initially presented as the primary concern.

8. MANAGE YOUR OWN EMOTIONS. The higher the stakes, the more difficult it is to keep your own emotions under control during difficult conversations. Failing to do so, however, can derail a situation and make matters worse. Becoming angry or defensive, taking what someone says too personally, or going into sulk mode serves no one. For example, you might be giving feedback to a team member about the need for them to improve their overall attitude, only to be met with sarcasm and negativity – the very thing you're trying to address. Instead of flying off the handle ("See, that's exactly what I mean!"), remain calm. Point out to the employee what you're observing about the dialogue, and ask them to assess how the exchange is unfolding from their point of view. Then get back to the issue at hand with a focus on your desired outcome.