

Effective Communication

Improving Communication Skills in Your Work and Personal Relationships

It sounds so simple: say what you mean. But all too often, what we try to communicate gets lost in translation despite our best intentions. We say one thing, the other person hears something else, and misunderstandings, frustration, and conflicts ensue.

Fortunately, you can learn how to communicate more clearly and effectively. Whether you're trying to improve communication with your spouse, kids, boss, or coworkers, you can improve the communication skills that enable you to effectively connect with others, build trust and respect, and feel heard and understood.

What is effective communication?

Communication is about more than just exchanging information. It's about understanding the emotion and intentions behind the information. Effective communication is also a two-way street. It's not only how you convey a message so that it is received and understood by someone in exactly the way you intended, it's also how you listen to gain the full meaning of what's being said and to make the other person feel heard and understood.

More than just the words you use, effective communication combines a set of skills including nonverbal communication, engaged listening, managing stress in the moment, the ability to communicate assertively, and the capacity to recognize and understand your own emotions and those of the person you're communicating with.

Effective communication is the glue that helps you deepen your connections to others and improve teamwork, decision making, and problem solving. It enables you to communicate even negative or difficult messages without creating conflict or destroying trust.

While effective communication is a learned skill, it 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.

Barriers to effective interpersonal communication

- **Stress and out-of-control emotion.** 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. Take a moment to calm down before continuing a conversation.
- **Lack of focus.** You can't communicate effectively when you're multitasking. If you're planning what you're going to say next, daydreaming, checking text messages, 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.
- **Inconsistent body language.** 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.
- **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.

Improving communication skills #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.

How do you become an engaged listener?

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.

- **Focus fully on the speaker**, his or her body language, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues. Tone of voice conveys emotion, so if you're thinking about other things, checking text messages or doodling, you're almost certain to miss the nonverbal cues and the emotional content behind the words being spoken. And if the person talking is similarly distracted, you'll be able to quickly pick up on it. 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.
- **Favor your right ear.** 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. Try keeping your posture straight, your chin down, and tilting your right ear towards the speaker—this will make it easier to pick up on the higher frequencies of human speech that contain the emotional content of what's being said.
- **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 a person. The most difficult communication, when successfully executed, can lead to the most unlikely and profound 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 by exercising your middle ear muscles

By increasing the muscle tone of the tiny middle ear muscles (the smallest in the body), you'll be able to detect the higher frequencies of human speech that impart emotion and be better able to understand what others are *really* saying. As well as by focusing fully on what someone is saying, you can exercise these tiny muscles by singing, playing a wind instrument, and listening to certain types of music (high-frequency Mozart violin concertos and symphonies, for example, rather than low-frequency rock or rap music).

Improving communication skills #2: Pay attention to nonverbal signals

When we communicate things that we care about, we do so mainly using nonverbal signals. 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.

Improving communication skills #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, 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.

Staying calm under pressure

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. These tips can help:

- **Use stalling tactics** to give yourself time to think. Have a question repeated, or ask for clarification of a statement before responding.
- **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 the middle of a conversation, you need something quick and immediate to bring down the emotional intensity. By learning to quickly reduce stress in the moment, though, you can safely face any strong emotions you're experiencing, regulate your feelings, and behave appropriately. When you know how to maintain a relaxed, energized state of awareness—even when something upsetting happens—you can remain emotionally available and engaged.

To deal with stress during communication:

- **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 and/or sore? 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** and **quickly manage stress** by taking a few deep breaths, clenching and relaxing muscles, or recalling a soothing, sensory-rich image, for example. The best way to rapidly and reliably relieve stress is through the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. But 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. Take a quick break and move away from the situation. 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.

Improving communication skills #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 assertiveness:

- **Value yourself and your opinions.** 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 effective communication

Effective communication help

- **Conflict Resolution Skills:** Building the Skills That Can Turn Conflicts into Opportunities
- **Fixing Relationship Problems with Humor:** Using Laughter and Play to Build and Maintain Successful Relationships
- **Nonverbal Communication:** Improving Your Nonverbal Skills and Reading Body Language
- **Overcoming Loneliness and Shyness:** Making Friends Even if You Feel Shy or Socially Awkward
- **How To Make Friends:** Tips on Meeting People and Building Friendships

Resources and references

Effective Communication: Improving Your Social Skills – Learn how to communicate more effectively, improve your conversation skills, and be more assertive. (AnxietyBC)

Core Listening Skills – Find tips on how to be a better listener and identify and improve the things that are getting in your way. (SucceedSocially.com)

Effective Communication (PDF) – How to effectively communicate in groups using nonverbal communication and active listening techniques. (University of Maine)

Some Common Communication Mistakes – Overview of common mistakes that get in the way of effective communication and how you can avoid them. (SucceedSocially.com)

Active Listening: Hear What People are Really Saying – Understanding active listening, particularly as it applies to the workplace, and the steps you can take to become an active listener. (MindTools.com)

Effective communication: books

Porges, Stephen W. (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-regulation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Sollier, Pierre (2005). *Listening for Wellness: An Introduction to the Tomatis Method*. The Mozart Center Press.

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