

Effective Communication

Being able to communicate effectively in the workplace may seem simple. But in today's diverse workforce, which brings together people from different backgrounds—along with varying belief systems and thought processes—communicating well requires a careful balance of tact, understanding and the ability to listen well.

With technology playing a greater role in how we do business, it's easy to forget just how best to relay a message or reach out to a colleague or manager. And with the pace of work growing ever faster, our attention spans have grown shorter. All too often, pressing "send" or writing a quick memo has replaced a critical face-to-face conversation.

Yet, when an employee can communicate effectively, it can help create a friendly and relaxed work environment, build strong teams and help advance a career.

The secrets of strong communicators

Communication, like everything else, is a skill that requires practice. Certainly, some people are naturally skilled communicators and are able to seem confident, empathetic and humorous all at once. But many of us need to work on how we address others. The good news? You can become a skilled communicator by simply reviewing the qualities of those who are good at it.

Strong communicators are comfortable with many different communication channels. Whether it's writing a note, calling up a client, talking to a supervisor, or sending an e-mail, they are adept at relaying a message.

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What is their secret?

1. Good communicators anticipate how their audience will react. They ask themselves a series of questions: Does this person or persons have a similar belief system? How do they like to communicate? Will I offend them if I communicate in a certain way?

2. They choose the method of delivery carefully. A strong communicator selects the best way to send their message, such as organizing a one-on-one meeting to discuss a sensitive, complex issue rather than sending an impersonal note. Or they use humor to put their audience at ease. And they always choose a personal approach over a technological one, such as a smile and handshake versus a text message.

3. They don't make assumptions. Strong communicators don't assume everyone understands their thought processes and will understand their message clearly. They consider cultural sensitivities and provide background information.

4. They use simple language to ensure they deliver the message they're sending. They omit colloquialisms, big, complicated words and abbreviations that could confuse other employees. And if they're presenting, they use simple-to-understand charts and diagrams to illustrate their points and speak in a slow, careful manner.

5. They reread documents, memos and e-mails to ensure they haven't missed key information or failed to convey critical points.

6. They are tactful—they don't make jokes that could offend a colleague or use offensive language. And they read others' body language for clues to their reactions.

7. Strong communicators seek feedback about their method of communication. They ask the recipients of their message if they have understood everything clearly and have questions. If anything is unclear, they address the area of confusion.

Needed: strong listening skills

Along with sending a message successfully, understanding someone else's message has also become a bit of an art form. Studies show that strong listening skills are in decline, due in part to the increase in the number of technological devices many of us use daily to interact with others and the increasing speed of doing business.

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But how employees listen have a very strong impact on how they interact with others, understand their job requirements and move ahead in the workplace.

Listening well takes effort—but the payoff can be great. Good listeners are better at conflict resolution, are less likely to misunderstand instructions and make mistakes and are often viewed by managers and colleagues as easy to deal with.

How does one become a better listener? The key is eliminating distractions, patiently focusing on what is being conveyed and by repeating the new information back to the sender—either verbally or electronically.

1. Take a time out. It's a lot harder to listen when you're on the run, in a moving vehicle or on a phone. If someone has sent you a critical memo or is relaying something important, give that person or document your full attention.

2. Be respectful. That means not checking your watch or email, tapping your foot nervously, cutting off someone abruptly or rolling your eyes impatiently. Your body language, if it's negative, can not only distract you from digesting information—it also lets the other person know you're not interested. On the other hand, if you lean in slightly, maintain eye contact and nod your head periodically, you'll show you're an active listener, while ensuring you retain what's being said.

3. Ask questions. By asking the speaker questions, you'll show that what they're saying matters to you. It will also ensure you're completely clear on what's being communicated.

4. Repeat back. By repeating back what you've just learned, you ensure that you're on track with that person's instructions. Plus, you'll be more likely to commit them to memory.

Dealing with less-effective communicators

While no one is a perfect communicator all of the time, some employees are better at it than others. If you work alongside a poor communicator, it may be difficult to deal with that person, to share ideas and to get through a meeting without a misunderstanding.

In a multi-cultural environment, sometimes what appears to be a poorly delivered or offensive message may be due to cultural and language challenges of both individuals. People who fail to communicate effectively often don't realize the impact their behavior has on others. When they are clear with themselves, they assume colleagues and managers will understand what they're attempting to express. When that doesn't happen, the whole process can become very frustrating.

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Dealing with such a person can be understandably challenging. Your first response might be to react angrily, creating a conflict you'll regret later. Instead, if you're on the receiving end of a poorly-worded memo you don't understand, follow up with that person under the guise of asking for additional details. It will make you seem interested without highlighting that individual's poor communication skills.

If you've just received a hostile comment, remain calm. If possible, ask the individual to tell you in a private location what's on their mind. And defuse the situation by addressing each issue that's raised in a non-confrontational way.

While you may not always be able to change a person who fails to communicate effectively, by taking the steps above, you'll be seen as someone who does. The techniques you'll learn in the process will undoubtedly help you grow in your interpersonal relationships, strengthening your role in the workplace.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your Expat EAP. All contact between you and your Expat EAP is completely confidential.

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