



Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication

We communicate with much more than words: when we interact with someone, our body has a language of its own. The way we sit, the gestures we make, the way we talk, how much eye contact we make – all of these are non-verbal ways of communicating that impact the messages our words are sending.

Managers who are adept at dealing with negative emotions in the workplace are mindful of how and what they communicate verbally *and* non-verbally. They are also receptive to the verbal and non-verbal messages of others. Perceptive managers can go beyond the words to discover the fuller meaning of a statement by observing non-verbal communication.

Our verbal messaging is communicated via the words that we use. The verbal message is of course an important part of our communication, but the way we communicate nonverbally is equally, and sometimes *more*, important.

Nonverbal communication includes the following:

- Tone of voice
- Rate and volume of speech
- How we articulate our words
- Rhythm, intonation and stress placed on words
- Facial expression
- The amount of eye contact we make
- Gestures/touch
- Body language and posturing

Research shows that when we communicate *feelings and attitudes*, only a small percentage of our overall message comes from the words we use.

- 55% of our message comes from body language (especially from movements of the small muscles around the eye which can convey shock, disbelief, doubt or disgust)
- 38% of our message comes from tone of voice
- Only 7% of our message is conveyed by the words we use (Mehrabian, 2007)

It's not *what* we say, but how we say it that often matters most, especially when we communicate feelings and attitudes. Tone of voice alone can convey anger, frustration, disappointment, sarcasm, confidence, affection or indifference.

Often our verbal and non-verbal messages are *consistent*, but they can sometimes be *inconsistent*. If someone's words conflict with their tone of voice and/or non-verbal behaviours, we often mistrust the words and tend to believe the non-verbal clues instead. It's not very convincing, for example, when someone tells you they're not angry at you, but they avoid eye contact, have an angry expression on their face, can barely force out the words, and slam their fist on the table while saying it.



Barriers to Sending Consistent Messages

We sometimes send confusing or negative non-verbal signals without knowing it. Many things can compromise our ability to communicate effectively:

- **Our stress level:** When we are experiencing personal or work-related stressors, we may be more likely to misread other people's messages and to send inconsistent or negative non-verbal signals. This may make it more likely for us to display inappropriate behaviours (e.g., yelling, blaming or impatience).
- **Our well-being (psychological and/or physical):** If we are not feeling well physically or emotionally, we can be more likely to focus on the negative aspects of a conversation and we may be more likely to send negative or uncaring non-verbal signals.
- **Distraction:** If we are distracted by thoughts or our environment (e.g., looking at emails on our computer screen while speaking to a worker) our non-verbal signals almost certainly convey disinterest. We may give people the impression that we don't care or are not listening, even when this may not be true.

Effective Non-Verbal Communication

To be able to communicate effectively (and accurately), we must be aware of our own emotions and also understand the non-verbal signals we're sending to others. Here are some tips that can help you communicate more effectively:

- **If you're feeling stressed or unwell, defer having important conversations. Reducing your own stress levels can help you interact more positively and effectively with others.**
- **Be aware if your mind is jumping to conclusions or if your face may be giving away your thoughts.** To keep yourself from being distracted by or reacting to your own thoughts, try keeping your mind focused on being open and curious about what is being said, and may be said next by the person in front of you. This can prevent some of the eye movements that give away your doubt or discomfort with what is being said.
- **Be attentive to inconsistencies.** Your non-verbal signals should reinforce what you're saying. Make sure your verbal and non-verbal messages match.
- **Give full attention to your communication partner.** Show people you speak to that you are 'present' and eager to understand them. Convey attentiveness by:
 - o Leaning slightly toward the other person
 - o Facing the other person squarely
 - o Keeping eye contact
 - o Maintaining an open and relaxed posture (with arms uncrossed)



-
- **Give signals that express understanding. Indicate that you understand, acknowledge and care with the following non-verbal signals:**
 - **Appropriate head nodding and facial gestures**
 - Sounds such as “ah”, “hm”, “oh,” expressed with matching eye and facial gestures

The ability to use non-verbal signals appropriately can create trust and transparency, and therefore can have a powerful influence on the quality of our relationships at work.

References

Mehrabian, A. (2007). *Nonverbal Communication*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.



Dealing with Unreasonable Requests

One of the many challenges managers encounter in the workplace is denying workers' requests, whether the requests are unreasonable or simply infeasible, in a way that minimizes negative outcomes. It can take courage for a worker to make a request, and many workers don't do so unless they are firmly convinced their request is necessary and reasonable. Denying their request can be a blow to their ego, make them feel undervalued, and lead to a range of negative emotions.

And yet, it would be next to impossible to say "yes" to every worker request, especially since some of their requests are bound to contradict each other (e.g., two workers want the same office). A better solution may be to find a way to meet the fundamental need or needs upon which the request was based (you may also find the exercise **Understanding Basic Human Needs** helpful). This can be accomplished by asking *why* a certain request is being made, rather than jumping to the answer 'no'.

The following two examples of how to ask why (rather than simply saying no) are adapted from *Preventing Workplace Meltdown: An Employer's Guide to Maintaining a Psychologically Safe Workplace* (Shain & Baynton, 2011).

When an individual asks for something like the corner office with the window, rather than just telling them that those offices are reserved for workers with more status and seniority, try asking why they want the corner office. You may find that they have seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and require as much sunlight as possible to feel healthy and productive. By exploring the request instead of simply refusing it, you are now able to find another way to help meet their underlying need. You could, perhaps, approve the purchase of a small full-spectrum light box for the worker. You may have turned a potentially negative situation into a great chance to prove that you care about the worker's welfare.

Another common example occurs when a worker asks to be transferred to another unit. If the transfer is not possible or prudent (or even if it is) you may want to ask their reason for wanting to leave, and inquire what they find unsatisfactory about their current unit. Again, this is a great opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to the worker's well-being. Managers often note the lack of value of moving people from unit to unit in an attempt to "solve" problems. If the problem is an individual's coping strategies, for example, their problems are highly likely to resurface after a brief honeymoon period in the new unit. If the problem happens to be the way the unit operates or interacts, it is very likely that the same problem will reappear for another worker when the first one is gone. In either case, the problem is not "solved" by a transfer; it is just delayed or relocated. By denying the transfer and addressing the reason underlying the request, on the other hand, a manager may not only enhance the worker's job experience and loyalty, but also resolve a problem that may have been bothering others, also.

Always keep in mind that it's best not just to say "no," but rather to explore the request with the worker and try to find an alternative solution that will help meet his or her needs. Remember also that meeting the need can be much better than fulfilling the request. It may be easier for a worker to request a corner office than to express an unsatisfied need for recognition in the workplace. The office may be just a stand-in for a need the worker does not want to express, or possibly can't even properly express. When a truly talented manager is able to discern workers' unmet needs and respond to them, workers may be more content and there may be far fewer negative emotions in the workplace.



Denying a request can be especially challenging in cases where a manager solicits a worker's opinion or input, but then must disagree or tell them "no." From the worker's perspective, this can make the manager's initial request for input seem disingenuous, and the worker may doubt whether the manager was ever truly interested in receiving feedback.

It is important to understand that **all requests (and behaviours) are actually an attempt to meet a need**. Satisfying the need underlying a request can be just as effective as satisfying the request.

Some needs are universal, such as:

- Security
- Belonging
- Acceptance
- Recognition
- Autonomy

Although needs are universal, **there are many different ways to satisfy each person's needs**.

Consider the need for autonomy. One worker may have a strong need for autonomy and may want you to give them a description of the outcomes you are seeking and then leave them to determine how to reach the objectives. Other workers may find that this much latitude makes them feel insecure, and they would rather have very specific, step-by-step instructions on how each task should be carried out. These workers also value their autonomy, but balance it in a different way with their need to feel secure that they are doing their tasks correctly. Only by paying careful attention to the needs of each worker can managers hope to satisfy those needs.

When a worker makes an unreasonable request, or simply a request that cannot be fulfilled, it is important to explore what needs they were hoping to meet through the request. If you can fulfill their need, a worker may be very satisfied even if their request is denied.

Reference

Shain, M., & Baynton, M. A. (2011). Preventing Workplace Meltdown: An Employer's Guide to Maintaining a Psychologically Safe Workplace (A Carswell Implementation Guide). Carswell: Toronto, ON.



Communication Tips for Speakers and Listeners

Communicating effectively can be challenging when dealing with a distressed worker. You may find your own emotions interfere, making communication more complex and demanding than in calmer or more neutral situations. There are a few basic techniques or tips you can use while speaking and listening to improve your communication style when dealing with workers' negative emotions. They are easy to understand, but require some practice before you may feel that you are mastering them.

Speaker Tips

When speaking to a worker, paying attention not just to your words but also to how the overall conversation is proceeding may help you convey your message more effectively. The following tips can be helpful to keep in mind when you are the "speaker":

- **Speak attentively:** Just as one listens attentively, one should also speak in the same manner, maintaining appropriate and direct eye contact and looking for body signals (facial or posture) that indicate that the other person is engaged. If the worker seems disengaged or seems to not be listening, you may need to modify your approach and also pause to inquire if you are making sense.
- **Phrase meaningful questions:** One way to shorten a conversation (and therefore make it unproductive) is to ask questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no." Instead, try to ask open-ended questions, as this may elicit more helpful, accurate information that may help you understand the worker's perspective.
- **Avoid monologues:** Stick to the point and avoid overly lengthy or repetitive statements. We sometimes repeat ourselves when we feel we have not been understood. Instead of repetition, which may seem condescending, pause and allow the worker to clarify and reflect on what they hear from you.
- **Accept silence:** Sometimes one of the best ways to make a point is to pause or leave a period of silence after speaking. This can allow you and the worker to digest what has been said.
- **Don't cross-examine:** Avoid firing questions at the worker when attempting to gather information during a conversation. Tact and diplomacy express respect and may be far better means for learning what you need to know.

Listener Tips



Many people listen to others, but only in the narrowest sense...they may hear the words, but they do not actually hear what others are saying. Good listening skills involve gaining a clear understanding of what is being said as well as what is intended by the speaker. The following tips may be helpful when you are in the role of “listener”:

- **Listen attentively:** Maintain good eye contact with the worker and acknowledge that you are hearing them.
- **Don't interrupt:** It's difficult to hear when you are talking yourself. It is natural to feel that you want to 'fix' things or that you have an effective answer. The problem is that if you have not heard all of what the person needs to say, your 'fix' may be for the wrong issue.
- **Clarify what you hear:** Regularly summarize or otherwise clarify your understanding of what is being said. This may help make sure you are obtaining the correct message. It is also important to admit if you don't understand something.
- **Reflect on what you hear:** This differs from clarification. Reflection involves showing the worker that you are aware of or understand what they are feeling. You hold up a metaphorical mirror so the worker can see more clearly what he or she is saying and what reactions it is eliciting.

It can be helpful for both parties to attempt to summarize their conversation so that no loose ends remain and both can have a clear understanding of what has been discussed. A summary can also allow you to set a direction for constructive follow-up.



Discussing Difficult Topics Effectively

It is inevitable that at some point managers must discuss difficult topics with other workers. Whether the issue is negative job performance, poor work ethic, sloppy appearance or inappropriate behaviour, addressing topics like these may be a challenge that causes apprehension for some managers.

The following tips can help you make the discussion more constructive and more likely to achieve a positive outcome:

- **Give the worker a heads-up:** Don't bring up the issue by surprise. Instead, inform the worker in advance that you want to discuss something important. Schedule the conversation at an appropriate time, but not too far in advance (as too much time may lead to unnecessary stress).
- **Hold the conversation in a private area:** Privacy is very important when having difficult discussions. Select a quiet and private place where no one can overhear your conversation and where you won't be interrupted. A busy lobby and cafeteria, for example, are most likely not appropriate places.
- **Articulate your roles and responsibilities as well as those of the worker:** Before starting your discussion, articulate how each of you will be able to fulfill your roles and responsibilities through this process (e.g., that you as a manager are required to provide and maintain a psychologically safe workplace, instruct and supervise workers, monitor work practices to ensure success, address inefficiency and solve problems as needed). Also clarify the roles and responsibilities of the worker (e.g., that all workers are required to follow workplace policies and procedures, complete assignments in a timely manner and respect the rights of other people at work). In doing this you indicate that you're dealing with the problem together as part of a group effort, which can help make the conversation less stressful and embarrassing.
- **Express your goals to the worker:** Start your discussion by defining what you hope to accomplish. Ensure that your goals are work or task oriented, rather than related to the worker's personality or character. For example, rather than stating your goal as having the worker "*be less negative at meetings*", it is preferable to state that the goal is to "*have positive and productive meetings*". How you achieve this goal may necessarily require a change in behaviour for the worker, but they may likely be happier to engage in the solution if it is framed in a non-threatening way. The goals you set are intended to help you and the worker stay focused and productive.
- **Inquire about the worker's comfort level:** Ask your worker if he/she is comfortable talking about the issue at hand and, if necessary, encourage them to share their experiences, problems and feelings openly. Point out that the content of your conversation will remain confidential.



- **Engage the worker and give permission to talk:** Invite the worker to share his or her perspective on the issue. This way you learn how they see the problem, and you can respond accordingly. Also involve the worker in finding solutions. People may be more likely to follow instructions if they feel that their perspective was heard and that they were at least partially responsible for the decision.
- **Inquire about the worker's concerns:** Give the worker the chance to express concerns, and ask if there are things that are bothering them.
- **Listen actively and ask clarifying questions:** Remain calm and listen actively to what the worker is saying. Let them know that you are listening and understanding by making eye contact, nodding your head, and occasionally reflecting and summarizing back what you have heard. Also ask clarifying questions if you don't completely understand the worker's point of view.
- **Focus on the behaviour/results, and not the person:** When describing the problem, stay neutral and focus on the issue or inappropriate behaviour, rather than focusing on the person. Be specific and objective in describing the behaviour, and avoid making assumptions or laying blame, as this can make the worker defensive. For example, the neutral feedback "*Efficiency is important to keep our customers satisfied*" can help avoid direct confrontation, while the feedback "*Your inefficiency is affecting our customer satisfaction*" attacks the worker, and may be more likely to cause a heated discussion.
- **Identify your end goal and confirm next steps:** At the end of the discussion, communicate your end goal clearly (it may have changed or been refined since you expressed your goal at the beginning of your conversation) and agree on the actions required to achieve it. Where possible, offer to put the agreed upon actions in writing for review by the worker. This can allow you both to agree to a shared understanding and provides an easy way to check back for success or a need for further discussion. Also set a timeline for achieving this end goal.
- **Thank the worker for participating:** At the end of the conversation, thank the worker for participating in the discussion and for their willingness to resolve the problem. Express your confidence in their ability to make changes and your desire for them to succeed. Offer to help in any way that is reasonable.
- **Follow up on changes and progress:** Follow up at appropriate intervals after your discussion to ensure that what you agreed upon is being accomplished. It is important to schedule feedback discussions to assess progress. Guide the worker with appropriate feedback. Don't expect sudden changes; be patient and also acknowledge incremental achievements.



Emotionally Intelligent Emailing

Email is one of the most common and frequent ways we communicate with workers, and its use continues to expand. For many workplaces, emailing is a necessary part of the job. Although emailing can be an easy and efficient way to deliver information to workers, there is the potential risk of messages becoming “lost in translation”, since there is no accompanying non-verbal communication to give clues about the meaning.

Here are a few tips for emotionally intelligent emailing:

- **Avoid misinterpretations:** Be aware that emails can easily be misinterpreted due to the absence of non-verbal messaging cues (e.g., tone of voice, facial expression, body language). There are a great range of interpretations that we can read into an email (e.g., the underlying tone and nuance of the email message). When writing about sensitive topics, try to envision the perspective of the recipient, and imagine how they will perceive the message. If you're unsure about possible misinterpretations of your message, ask someone for an additional perspective before sending the email.
- **Know the limits of written humour:** The recipient of an email can't see your grin or hear your laugh when you mean something to be funny. To avoid misunderstanding in these cases, let the recipient know that you're not serious by adding “grin”, “LOL” or a smiley face icon after the comment (if this is appropriate in your workplace).
- **Don't overuse email – know when it's better to talk in person:** Avoid using email for sensitive or complex topics. When an online exchange is becoming too emotional, too significant, or simply too difficult, it may be better to pick up the phone or talk in person.
- **Be careful with confidential content:** Always ask yourself whether the content may be too confidential to send by email, remembering that messages can get lost or be intercepted by hackers. Also keep in mind that a range of people (e.g., supervisor, co-workers, family members) might also have access to the intended recipient's email.
- **Be aware of the “disinhibition effect”:** When communicating online, we tend to experience a disinhibition effect. Without having the other person there in person, we may not worry as much about their response. For this reason, it can be easier to offend someone online than in person. Before clicking “send”, always ask yourself if you would have the courage to say the same things face-to-face.
- **Never send an email in anger:** When we're angry, we're generally much less able to think clearly and act appropriately. It is a good idea, therefore, to calm yourself down before you send an email. You can save your email as a draft and read it again later. Once your emotions are settled, you'll be in a much better state to evaluate your message and edit it if necessary.



Expressing Respect & Appreciation

Receiving positive feedback from managers can make workers feel good about themselves and proud of their workplace contributions. It can make them feel capable, motivated, and a valued part of the team. They can feel a strong sense of morale and a meaningful bond with team members. Expressing respect and appreciation can be an important tool in maintaining a positive and effective work environment, and can help reduce the likelihood that workers experience negative emotions due to work-related issues. Workers who feel appreciated may also be more likely to provide managers with positive feedback. It can be a win-win situation when managers and workers regularly communicate respect and appreciation to each other in the workplace. Supportive communication of this sort is a skill that can be developed and practiced. Here are some examples of how respect and appreciation can be communicated effectively. A less effective approach is also provided to highlight the differences:

Situation / Less Effective Communication	More Effective Communication
<p>You are held up by your own work and are late for a meeting led by a coworker. Your coworker has already started presenting when you arrive. You sit down and stay for the meeting. After the meeting, you leave without talking to the coworker.</p>	<p>When there is a break in the presentation by the coworker, apologize to the coworker for being late and communicate that you value the presentation. You may also want to give a brief and sincere reason as to why you were late.</p> <p>E.g., <i>“I’m sorry that I was late for your presentation. I was caught up with sending off a report. Were there any handouts or key pieces of information that I missed? If you have a minute, could you please give those to me?”</i></p>
<p>You’re discussing ideas with a worker about a particular procedure in the office, and she makes a good suggestion for improving the process. A couple of days later, you bring up the suggestion in a meeting (along with many of your own) without acknowledging that one part of it was her idea.</p>	<p>Give credit to the individual who earned it, even if it is only indirectly related to, or a small percentage of, the overall work. This type of respect can in turn lead to respect and appreciation for you in the long run.</p> <p>E.g., <i>“Catherine raised the idea of ___ the other day and I thought it’s a good idea because ___. What do people think about us implementing this?”</i></p>
<p>You are coordinating a team and members have emailed you their contribution to the work. You don’t provide any response (positive or negative).</p>	<p>Reply to each member with a quick ‘thank you’ email. No matter how brief, this shows that you appreciate their time. Give constructive feedback if applicable. This can communicate that you care about their work and their professional development.</p> <p>E.g., <i>“Thanks for sending this. Good work. It would be great if you also add a section about ___.”</i></p>



Situation / Less Effective Communication	More Effective Communication
<p>You need to discuss an issue with a worker. You start talking about the issue immediately as soon as you see him in the hallway.</p>	<p>Show that you value his time by checking to see if he is free to chat.</p> <p>E.g., <i>“Do you have a minute? I want to talk to you about ____.”</i></p> <p><i>“Hi, is this a good time to talk about __?”</i></p> <p><i>“Would you mind staying behind a bit after the meeting? I want to check in with you about ____.”</i></p> <p><i>“Do you have any time right now? I want to hear your thoughts about ____.”</i></p>
<p>An administrative worker has helped you reschedule a few meetings because you have a dentist appointment. Since this is a part of their job, you felt that a simple “thanks” would do.</p>	<p>Support staff workers often have to assist a number of people and have a lot on their plates. You acknowledge this fact and communicate genuine appreciation for the help.</p> <p>E.g., <i>“I really appreciate you doing this for me. I know you’re super busy, so thank you.”</i></p>
<p>You are editing a proposal drafted by your colleague. You notice that she did not include a few things that were originally discussed. You indicate to her that x, y and z are missing and that she should add those before making you read the proposal, as your time is precious.</p>	<p>There may be a number of reasons why people do not do things as previously agreed upon. You are aware of this and give your colleague the benefit of the doubt. You bring it up with courtesy and give her a chance to explain.</p> <p>E.g., <i>“The proposal reads really well. I notice, though, that x, y and z didn’t make it into the draft. Did you mean to leave those out?”</i></p>



Monitoring Your Communication Style

Managers engage in a number of different communication styles with workers. One usually effective and helpful style is *assertive* communication. Less effective communication techniques include *aggressive*, *passive* or *passive-aggressive* styles. It is important to understand the different communication styles to help you monitor your communication and minimize your use of non-assertive patterns. It is particularly important to be aware of your communication style when interacting with a distressed worker. It can be natural to engage in passive communication with someone who is feeling distressed (due to a worry that you may further upset them by being assertive) or to engage in an aggressive or passive-aggressive style (if you are feeling frustrated or upset by the worker's behaviour). Assertive communication can be an effective alternative, and is a skill that anyone can develop.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication involves expressing your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings while considering and respecting the needs of others. You aim for a win-win situation by balancing your rights with the rights of others. Assertive communication is open, straightforward and earnest. You communicate your message as clearly as possible without embedding any other underlying or hidden messages. Assertive communication can help strengthen relationships, solve problems more effectively, and reduce negative emotions in the workplace (e.g., anger, frustration, guilt and fear).

One key to communicating assertively is to use "*I*" statements when talking to workers: "*I feel frustrated when you are late for our weekly progress meetings. I don't like starting over again and repeating myself.*" This type of statement indicates that you are taking ownership of your feelings and behaviours and are not blaming the worker. This can make your directives and feedback easier to accept.

Communicating assertively also includes:

- Speaking in a calm, clear and well-modulated voice
- Showing interest and sincerity by keeping eye contact, smiling and nodding your head (as appropriate)
- Maintaining an open and relaxed posture
- Communicating your feelings and needs appropriately and respectfully
- Communicating respect for others
- Asking for what you want/need (instead of ordering it)
- Asking questions in order to hear other people's feelings and needs
- Listening to the other person's point of view (without interrupting)
- Saying "no" in a productive and respectful way



In contrast, communication styles that are *aggressive*, *passive* or *passive-aggressive* are less helpful.

Aggressive Communication

With aggressive communication, you express your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings without considering and respecting the needs of others. You advocate for your own interests at the expense of others, attempting to use forceful communication to subdue and suppress contrasting viewpoints.

Aggressive communication often involves “*you*” *statements* and attacks on a worker, rather than effective expressions of needs. For example, stating “*you are never on time*” instead of “*I need you to be on time*”. Managers and workers who communicate in an aggressive manner are in general perceived as egoistic and unwilling to make compromises.

Other characteristics of aggressive communication may include:

- Speaking in a loud, bossy and demanding voice
- Having piercing eye contact
- Maintaining an overbearing posture
- Dominating/controlling others by blaming, intimidating, criticizing, threatening or attacking them
- Acting impulsively and rudely (low frustration tolerance)
- Commanding what you want/need (instead of requesting it)
- Rarely asking questions (only interested in your needs and goals)
- Not listening well to the other person
- Interrupting the other person frequently
- Being unwilling to accept “no” or to make compromises

Passive Communication

Passive communication occurs when you do not express your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings, where this would be advisable. You simply don’t stand up for yourself.

Characteristics of passive communication may include:

- Speaking in an overly apologetic or submissive manner
- Avoiding eye contact/poor eye contact
- Having a slumped body posture
- Holding back on stating your feelings and needs
- Giving in to other people, and ignoring your own needs
- Doing what you are asked regardless of how you feel about it
- Being unable to say “no” when asked for a favor
- Rarely asking other people for help



Passive-Aggressive Communication

Passive-aggressive communication is a combination of the above two styles. It involves being passive in the manner in which you express your needs, desires, ideas and feelings, but being aggressive in your underlying intent. Communicating passive-aggressively often involves not speaking your message, but rather trying to convey it through small disrespectful, annoying or ambiguous comments and actions. Workers are behaving passive-aggressively, for example, when they avoid speaking directly to managers about their concerns, and express their dissatisfaction through other behaviours that seem manipulative.

Characteristics of passive-aggressive communication may include:

- Speaking in a sarcastic voice/using sarcasm
- Using non-verbal behaviours such as sighing and eye-rolling
- Using facial expressions and body language that are inconsistent with how you feel (e.g., smiling when you're upset)
- Avoiding dealing directly with a disruptive issue (e.g., acting passively and denying that there is a problem, muttering to yourself rather than confronting the person)
- Acting deceptively (appearing cooperative but acting uncooperatively)
- Acting out in a subtle, indirect manner (e.g., sabotaging another person to get even)

Aggressive, passive, and passive-aggressive communication approaches each risk eliciting negative reactions from others. While assertive communication techniques cannot guarantee positive reactions, they are usually more effective in the long run. Also, it is important to keep in mind communication is affected in part by the level of trust that workers have in your ability to lead. This trust includes faith in your character and integrity, as well as faith in your competence to fulfill your role and lead your team. Where trust is built up, small errors in communication may be overlooked or forgiven. Where trust is absent, even an innocent comment may be taken out of context and seen as threatening or disrespectful.



Providing Negative Feedback, Constructively

Critiquing is a large part of managerial work. It can help guide workers to better performance and ultimately benefit the whole team. However, when managers give negative feedback, it means identifying other people’s weaknesses and mistakes, and consequently risks making workers defensive and unmotivated. This can be difficult both for the person giving the feedback, and the person receiving it.

There are a number of strategies that can help managers provide negative feedback in a respectful, helpful and effective manner. When providing negative feedback, focus on the overarching aim of the feedback as being **constructive**, **specific** and geared toward **behavioural change**. Doing the following can be helpful:

- Begin with a clear articulation of the preferred outcome. This can sometimes eliminate the need for negative criticism altogether, as you work toward how the preferred outcome might be achieved.
- acknowledge the worker’s efforts, and emphasize that they are a valued member of your team/organization
- acknowledge an individual’s strengths (as there are always strengths) as well as providing performance feedback
- make feedback specific to behaviours (not to the individual’s characteristics or personality)
- provide clear, concrete examples of behaviours
- give the worker a chance to respond to your feedback
- where appropriate, frame the feedback process as an opportunity for professional growth
- keep in mind that most, if not all, workers will be emotionally triggered by some types of criticism; don’t take this personally

Here are examples of less effective versus more effective ways of giving feedback:

Situation	Less Effective	More Effective
A worker leaves an important part out of a proposal. You are surprised, as you had talked about the importance of following a set template for proposals with him.	You blame the worker for mistakes made, assuming he was being lazy or oppositional. <i>“Take it back and do it in the way we discussed. When I said we needed to include this part, I meant it.”</i>	Give the worker the benefit of the doubt and don’t assume negative intentions. <i>“I want all proposals to consistently use this template. I’ve noticed that you tend to prepare the proposals in a different template. Is there a reason for this?”</i>



Situation	Less Effective	More Effective
You're asking a worker to stop making irrelevant comments during meetings.	You show that you're frustrated and tell the worker to stop their behavior, but you don't explain why. You provide no opportunity for the person to understand exactly what's wrong. <i>"Could you not ask these kinds of questions during our meetings? It's annoying."</i>	<i>"I need our meetings to stay focused on the agenda and to be productive. When a comment like that is made in meetings [be specific], it can sometimes lead to unproductive conversations [state consequence], which we want to avoid because we only get one hour for every meeting [explain why]."</i>
You are critiquing a worker's written work.	Your feedback is vague. You assume that the worker can guess what you want. <i>"This isn't really what I was after. Please change it."</i>	Feedback should clearly convey your desired outcomes. <i>"I'd like you to emphasize x and y and take out z, because it's not the focus of this report."</i>
A member of your team misunderstands what she was supposed to do for her part of the project, and does something different.	Your criticisms are harsh and inconsiderate. <i>"What were you thinking, doing this task using this method? You should know better!"</i>	Try to be understanding of the worker. <i>"I can see why you might think that this method applies to this problem, but actually...."</i>
A worker has been on the job for three months, and you've noticed that she does some things poorly. You'd like her to improve her performance.	You want to tell her just how incompetent you think she is, so you criticize her the moment you see her next. <i>"You know, you've been here for three months already. You should be able to do x,y,z by now."</i>	Set up a meeting. Talk in privacy to demonstrate respect. Frame the feedback as an opportunity for growth. <i>"As your manager, I have the responsibility to help all my staff meet their performance standards which are xyz. I've noticed that you do x very well, so I'd like you to keep up the good work. Where you need some improvement is doing y more...."</i>
A worker is often late for work. You initially give him the benefit of the doubt, but you are becoming concerned and frustrated. You are beginning to think he's an irresponsible person.	You criticize the worker's character. <i>"I thought that since you're a father of two, you'd be more responsible, seeing as how you have to set a good example for your kids."</i>	You criticize the behaviour and give specifics. <i>"I noticed you're arriving late about three days out of the week. I know you stay late to make up the time, but that's a problem because we need you to open the counter."</i>



As you might notice, constructive feedback sounds considerably more positive to the listener. It generally can make workers more motivated to accept feedback. When comments are negative in tone and sound more like scolding than guiding, workers can feel disrespected and may be more likely to refrain from changing their behaviour. Always maintaining a constructive approach with workers can help you build mutually respectful working relationships.



Resolving Conflict with a Needs-Based Approach

Managers hold a range of diverse responsibilities (part of what makes the job so challenging!), including creating a respectful and psychologically safe work environment. This includes stepping in to help improve situations when workers find themselves in strained working relationships. Proactively addressing conflict between and among workers can improve the cohesiveness of your team, enhance workers' morale, and ultimately increase productivity.

Resolving conflict between two (or more) workers can be challenging for a number of reasons. It can put you in the awkward position of feeling like a referee or mediator. It may be hard to remain neutral or objective given your past experiences with different workers. You may be unfairly accused of taking sides. You may feel that it is a no-win situation, given that one person will seemingly always end up being unhappy.

Certainly, there are always workplace situations with clear "right" and "wrong" sides, in which one worker's desired outcome or request is undoubtedly justified. In these cases, it is your job as a manager to make a unilateral decision while still responding in a way that seeks to preserve the dignity of all parties. Most conflict situations, however, are not so clear-cut.

A work organization is just like any social organization—there are collective goals but also individual needs and motivations. Conflict situations can arise when workers' feel that their core work-specific needs (e.g., respect, fairness, recognition, safety) are being violated or not being met.

A strategy that can be effective for resolving conflict between workers, especially where one or more is emotionally distressed, is to take what is referred to as a "needs-based" approach. This approach emphasizes cooperation, rather than competition. It focuses on trying to meet all sides' needs in some way. It also involves an assumption that conflict usually arises because they have been unable to advocate more effectively for their work-specific needs to be met and that meeting those needs can go a long way in helping to resolve the issue.

Some of the types of workplace conflicts relate to the following (examples of relevant work-specific needs appear in parentheses):

- disagreements over workload (fairness, equity)
- conflict over ownership of or recognition for projects or tasks (acknowledgement, recognition, appreciation, respect)
- personality differences, including embarrassment or hurt due to gossip or teasing (acceptance, closeness, community)
- dissatisfaction concerning job responsibilities (autonomy, creativity)

One of the most immediate needs any worker in a conflict has is to safely express their perspectives. When faced with conflict between workers, the common approach of bringing all parties to the conflict together may not be the most effective strategy if emotions are running high, or if one or more of the parties is experiencing emotional distress (including depression or anxiety-related disorders). The



standard conflict dispute approach may make the workers feel as though they are unnaturally forced to resolve the conflict, just like schoolchildren might be made to shake hands after a skirmish. Workers simply perceive too much pressure to give in or else risk appearing difficult or being accused of not acting like a “team player.” The end result in these situations may be a temporary truce, but not a clear resolution of the issues.

Instead of initially bringing the parties together, it can be effective to use a method promoted by Mary Ann Baynton that she refers to as “shuttle diplomacy” (a term she borrowed from international relations). The process involves the manager (or another trusted third party) meeting with the workers individually, providing each with a secure and private opportunity to voice their needs and concerns and to discuss possible solutions to the conflict. This approach has the critical benefit of recognizing that when one party to a conflict is particularly vulnerable to emotional distress, the playing field of any conflict mediation cannot be considered level. It provides a sense of being heard and respected, even when the person is partially or primarily to blame for the conflict. It helps to focus each participant on a solution, rather than rehashing the problem or disputing the facts. It can also avoid the possibility of a hostile escalation of the situation with disrespectful behaviour such as name-calling, yelling or swearing. It can help to reduce the feelings of shame or blame that often result in the need to justify or defend their positions. By developing a solution that each person can feel good about, it increases the chances of sustainability and long-term commitment to success. When one person ‘wins’ and the other ‘loses’ or worse, when both feel they have ‘lost’ or have been forced to unfairly compromise, the chance for sustainability is usually low.

The shuttle diplomacy technique is particularly appropriate for use by managers who have good interpersonal instincts and understand needs-based problem-solving. During the separate meetings with the individual workers, it can be very useful to take the following steps:

- Have each worker separately identify what they need to resolve the conflict. Keep the conversation focused on solutions by refocusing each time it goes back into a discussion about the problem. Questions such as the following may help: “*What would make that better?*”; “*What specifically needs to change?*”; “*What do you need to see in terms of behaviour or language for you to feel that this has been resolved?*”
- Ensure that each person has an opportunity to fully verbalize their solution, while you manage expectations and coach them where the requests may be unreasonable or not feasible. Ask each worker *why* they are making the request: this question is key as it can help identify both for you and the other worker the rationale for the request. This can often help workers understand each others’ positions (as transmitted through the manager). You may also want to refer to the information handout **Dealing with Unreasonable Requests**.
- Try to identify (and verbalize) the work-specific need that seems to be at stake for each party.
- Remember that we cannot change personalities, but we can ask for specific behaviours or interactions to change (i.e. we cannot ask a co-worker to become happier, but we can ask that they refrain from specific negative comments directed at or about another co-worker. We would have to also consider an option if there is a legitimate complaint to be made, such as directing those negative comments directly to a supervisor.)



- Once each worker has agreed on what they need to move forward in this situation, ask him or her to identify what they will commit to doing differently to help this solution remain successful. This personal commitment is often an important component of a sustainable resolution.
- When all of these points have been covered, ask each party to help develop a plan to measure success, as well as a plan to deal with future issues that may arise. This gives a clear path forward in terms of follow up.
- Once you have brokered an agreement that all parties can feel reasonably good about, it is time to bring them together to go over the plan. The point here is that there is no need to justify or defend positions, the plan is intended to be one that both can feel satisfied with and each party can walk away with self-esteem intact.

You may need to emphasize that some of the animosity in a conflict situation may be due to misunderstandings about each workers' perspective. Use language that encourages positive thinking (e.g., "*you are both valuable members of the team*"). Remember that even when workers are at odds on an issue, they likely both share similar needs and wants (e.g., for respect, autonomy, fairness).

Understanding each worker's position, and working toward a solution that considers both sides' needs, can help lead to the most amicable outcomes. With their privacy and dignity intact, and their individual needs accounted for using the shuttle diplomacy, needs-based approach, the workers may be much more likely to accept and embrace a solution, as compared to the resistance they may exhibit if they feel a solution is being imposed on them in a process that feels humiliating or forced. This can go a long way toward fostering a work environment that is safe, welcoming, and cohesive for everyone.

You may find the exercise handout **Understanding Basic Human Needs** helpful.



Strengthening Relationships at Work

There are a number of things managers can do to strengthen relationships with workers. Strengthening connections with workers can lead to a win-win situation, in that workers may feel respected and valued, and can become much more engaged and productive in their work. And, managers may find that it is much easier to deal with a worker's negative emotions or psychological health struggles when the foundation of their relationship with the worker is strong.

We can effectively build connections with workers by verbally or nonverbally seeking contact with them (i.e., making what psychologist Dr. John Gottman calls "connection bids"). A connection bid is an attempt to create connections between two people, and is essential for building, maintaining and improving relationships. A connection bid can be anything that we do to seek contact with another person:

- **Asking for information:** e.g., asking a worker how to solve a work problem. *"Would you mind helping me with interpreting this spreadsheet? I'm struggling to get my head around the numbers."*
- **Showing interest:** e.g., asking workers about their hobbies or recent holidays. *"Have you been doing any hiking lately?"*
- **Expressing affirmation and approval:** e.g., complimenting a worker on his latest accomplishment. *"Your presentation yesterday was excellent!"*
- **Expressing caring or support:** e.g., demonstrating concern about a worker's health condition. *"Your cough sounds awful. You should think about going home to recover."*
- **Offering assistance:** e.g., offering support to a worker who is overloaded with tasks. *"Would you like me to ask Jocelyn to help you with that project?"*
- **Making a humorous comment:** e.g., lighthearted joking with a worker about a mistake you made. *"Sometimes the hurrier I go, the behinder I get!"*
- **Sending non-verbal signals:** e.g., a smile, a wink, a wave, a pat on the back or a thumbs up.

Responses to Workers' Connection Bids

In the same way that we reach out and connect with workers, workers make connection bids themselves. The way we respond to workers can also impact the nature of the relationship. When someone seeks contact with us, we can either *turn toward* them (a more effective response), or we can respond by *turning against* or *turning away* from them (less effective responses).



<p>Example: A worker is asking his manager for feedback. <i>"I would appreciate it if you could let me know how you think my presentation went yesterday."</i></p>		
More Effective Response	Less Effective Response	
<p>Turning Toward We respond in a positive way. We show interest and convey affection, acceptance, agreement, encouragement or excitement.</p>	<p>Turning Against We respond in a rejecting way. We appear argumentative, critical, sarcastic, irritable, hostile or dismissive.</p>	<p>Turning Away We respond in an ignoring way. We show disinterest and avoid a response (e.g., by acting preoccupied).</p>
<p>Example: <i>"Of course. Why don't you come by my office in half an hour?"</i> or <i>"Great idea! Come to think of it, I should give you feedback more regularly."</i></p>	<p>Example: <i>"You know I'm swamped today preparing for the big meeting tomorrow."</i> or <i>"Why don't you ask one of the other team members what they thought?"</i></p>	<p>Example: <i>"Sorry, but I'm swamped. I should go prepare for the meeting tomorrow."</i> or <i>"I don't have time to chat right now."</i></p>

The way we respond to workers has a sizable impact on the nature of the relationships that result. If we repeatedly turn *against* or turn *away* from workers, they may eventually stop reaching out. On the contrary, if we turn *toward* a person as often as we can, the relationship can be strengthened and become more positive and supportive.

References

Gottman, John. (2002). *The Relationship Cure*. New York: Three Rivers Press.



Why Dealing with Conflict is Difficult

If you find dealing with conflict in the workplace one of the most challenging aspects of your job, you are not alone. Many managers report that their stress levels increase when they have to deal with workplace conflict. This includes direct conflict with another individual, as well as managing or mediating conflict between workers.

There are a number of reasons workplace conflict can be so challenging.

1. We are Social Beings

We have a tendency to build alliances and to want to belong in a group. From a biological point of view, this benefit our survival. Being in a group and taking on functional roles (e.g., “resource-gatherer”, “bread-winner”, “caregiver”, “communicator”) may help ensure our safety and well-being. It is natural for people to fear disapproval, because it can jeopardize our group belongingness. *Unaddressed workplace conflict can jeopardize group functioning. Conflict between two workers, for example, can start to seep into the entire team’s interactions, threatening the well-being of others and the chance of achieving collective goals. A manager who does not address or who avoids conflict may inadvertently create a dynamic where their avoidance makes him or her less accepted or respected by the entire group.*

2. We Can Have an Ingrained Stress Response to Conflict

Conflict situations can trigger an innate stress response. When we encounter something difficult or aversive, our natural tendency is to escape or avoid the situation. The easiest thing to do when confronted with conflict may be to pretend we don’t notice and hope that it will go away on its own. Here are some common workplace examples of how we attempt to avoid conflict:

- Angrily stewing over a worker’s rude comment without addressing it openly
- Keeping certain opinions to ourselves during worker evaluations because we don’t want to upset the worker
- Trying to stop the conflict by sacrificing our own needs (e.g., taking on workers’ workloads so they do not argue over who does more)
- Switching departments to avoid having to deal with a group of workers who don’t get along with each other
- Procrastinating on scheduling a meeting to address conflict between two workers, hoping that the incident will just be forgotten.

While avoidance may bring short-term relief to our anxiety, it leaves the conflict unresolved. This can worsen or complicate the conflict for parties involved. It also denies managers the opportunity to build a stronger team and to reinforce their role as leader.



3. We are Positively Reinforced for Being Agreeable

For some of us, our default response when conflict arises is to be passive, minimizing or agreeable. This type of response is often positively rewarded by those who are or have been close to us (e.g., parents, partners, kids, friends); people tend to like people who don't challenge them if a difficult or contentious issue arises. *Although avoidance of conflict is an adaptive response in some situations, this isn't always the case. In workplace situations in particular, unaddressed conflict situations can often get worse, not better, over time.*

4. We May Fear Backlash

We may often avoid conflict due to fears of damaging work relationships, or of being viewed as the "bad guy/girl", or due to concerns our reputation will be damaged in some other way. One fundamental human need is to want to be viewed positively by others, including people we work with. *Avoiding conflict may serve us well in the short-term, but can lead to bigger problems if left unaddressed. Keep in mind that when a manager handles conflict situations ethically, professionally and respectfully, workers' perceptions are often more positive than when the situations are left unaddressed.*