

Effective communication for every work environment.

George Bernard Shaw said, “The problem with communication is the *illusion* that it has been accomplished.” Have you ever completed a conversation with someone, walked away feeling good, only to discover later that what you said was not even heard, or interpreted completely different than your intent? That’s the *illusion*.

“We send from 100 to 300 messages a day [but] we hear only half of what is said to us, understand only half of that, believe only half of that, and remember only half of that,” writes Kathy Walker, Kansas State University. That’s because 90% of our communication about emotions and relationships is done without words through speech, gestures, facial expressions, and posture.

Communication through speech is uniquely human. We have every communication tool you can think of at our fingertips today, using the internet for Sykpe, Twitter, Facebook and email, and still have difficulty truly communicating with each other. Much of what we call communication today is actually a one-sided conversation. Good communication takes place *one interactive conversation* at a time. A true conversation involves both speaking AND listening.

Companies, schools, families and individuals all need effective communication. We talk because we have a thought, feeling, or idea we want to share. If we are part of a company or an educational institution, we need to understand and share the mission of the organization to succeed. It’s necessary for a diverse group of people to make good decisions for the future.

Here are five tips to help you communicate more effectively in any situation:

1. Identify the purpose of the conversation. Why were you having a conversation? Were you expressing frustration or making a correction? Or, were you trying to help instead?

In *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* (2007), Marshall Goldsmith explains why some people in the corporate world cannot get to the top of their company: Charismatic, intelligent, and skilled in many areas, these folks may simply not say *thank you* enough, leading to negative perceptions about them that prevents these people back. Goldsmith’s suggestion: “*Judge less, help more.*”

2. Listen with intention. Listening with intention is also referred to as “active listening.” Give the person speaking your full attention. Not imagining your response before they have finished, or drifting off to the next thing you must tackle on your “to do” list. Listen with your whole body in an open and receptive posture. Concentrate on allowing them to speak without interruptions.

3. Acknowledge thoughts and feelings first. If there has been a complaint that there is too much work to do and not enough time to get it done, begin with a statement such as,

“Sounds like you are really frustrated with this situation.” Feelings, or emotions, are a complex interaction between the brain and body. Because emotions are fundamental to humans in making decisions, they are a key component of communication. If the emotions are not acknowledged, clear thinking may be blocked.

4. Test your interpretation. You may want to ask a clarifying question to make sure you understand. Try paraphrasing and reflecting back to the speaker “Sounds like you are really frustrated by trying to get it all done. Am I right?” As most parents know, using “I” statements is much better if you want to be heard yourself. It avoids judging, and keeps the listener open, rather than defensive or angry.

5. Deliver an effective message. In a dialogue, the other side of listening is speaking. Whether you are the supervisor or the employee, it is necessary to agree on what the actual issue is before it can be addressed. In the situation described above, the actual issue is too much work and not enough time to complete it. Is it possible to find someone to help with the work? Can some of the deadlines be changed? Is there an item on the list that is actually less important, or may not even be necessary to complete for the success of a project? For instance, could a good decision be made with less data? This requires that you are clear about the outcome you want (that the project, book, or strategy document needs to be finished on time and on budget). How can you jointly make this occur? Brainstorming options is essential here.

Effective communication is a *learned skill* that anyone in any work environment can master. Healthy organizations and healthy relationships develop one conversation at a time. If you want to be the person that everyone turns to resolve a conflict, or to rise to the top of your organization, be willing to do the work involved in learning these simple communication techniques.

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