



Unit 17 Communication Techniques for the Workplace

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Enhance your ability to handle difficult situations
- ✓ Deal with situations assertively

Unit 17

Communication Techniques for the Workplaces

Communication Styles

Dichotomies in Theory

Differences among groups of people can be identified by marked preferences among pairs of opposites like those in the following list. We will call these pairs of words “dichotomies.” Some examples:

- Ñ Cooperative and Competitive
- Ñ Assertive and Passive
- Ñ Direct and Indirect
- Ñ Individualistic and Team-oriented
- Ñ Optimistic and Pessimistic

What are the advantages of the direct mode of communication?

What are the disadvantages of the direct mode of communication?

What are the advantages of the indirect mode of communication?

What are the disadvantages of the indirect mode of communication?

Abstract - concrete

- Ñ accommodating - competing
- Ñ active - passive
- Ñ animated - lethargic
- Ñ arrogant - humble
- Ñ assertive - meek
- Ñ attached - detached
- Ñ big picture - details
- Ñ concrete - abstract
- Ñ decisive - indecisive
- Ñ deep - shallow
- Ñ direct - indirect
- Ñ factual - intuitive
- Ñ formal - informal
- Ñ harmonious - disruptive
- Ñ hesitant - impulsive
- Ñ individualistic - team oriented
- Ñ listening - talking

- Ñ objective - subjective
- Ñ optimistic - pessimistic
- Ñ organized - chaotic
- Ñ patient - impatient
- Ñ personal - impersonal
- Ñ playful - serious
- Ñ realistic - idealistic
- Ñ reflective - impulsive
- Ñ simple - complex
- Ñ structured - flexible
- Ñ taking turns - interrupting
- Ñ tense - relaxed
- Ñ yes, and - yes, but

Creating a Positive Self-Image

Seven Things People Determine from Your Appearance

Another element of our communication with others is our image of ourselves and our awareness of how others see us. This is a big part of our ability to give feedback to, and take feedback from, others.

While it may not seem fair or accurate, people do make judgments based on your appearance. If you take a deep look inside yourself, you probably judge people by their appearance too. In general, we tend to assume seven things, just based on appearance alone.

These things include:

- Ñ Income
- Ñ Educational Level
- Ñ Social Position
- Ñ Sophistication
- Ñ Success
- Ñ Moral Character
- Ñ Trustworthiness

Self-Evaluation

Part One: Self-Assessment

Read the following questions and check yes or no for each question.

	Yes	No
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Have you tried to wear your hair in a different way? Some ideas: part it on the other side, straighten it, curl it, color it, or have it buzzed short.		
Do your glasses allow for good eye contact to take place?		
Do people notice your jewelry?		
Are people distracted by your clothing or jewelry?		
Do you organize the clothes in your closet so that they are coordinated for easy dressing in the morning?		
Are you always neatly groomed? (Includes a daily shower, nails neat and trimmed, clothes clean and pressed, and shoes polished.)		

Part Two: A Plan for Change

List three habits about your dress and appearance that you want to enhance, strengthen, or eliminate.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Write out your plan to achieve these changes.

Frame of Reference

A frame of reference is a way in which we judge other people. We all make judgments about people but in order to really get the meaning of what’s going on, we need to be able to suspend those judgments and let their meaning come to us unfettered. A communicator’s ability to suspend their frame of reference is a critical and important skill because it can build their credibility and make them a more effective communicator.

Your frame of reference is made up of your beliefs, assumptions, values, feelings, judgments, emotions, advice, moods, thoughts, biases, and stress levels at any given moment. Because your frame of reference is so personal and so deeply embedded, it is very difficult to practice suspending it on a regular basis. We

often interpret reality from our own vantage point and react in a self-serving manner. We have to learn to take others' points of view and feelings, as well as our own, into consideration.

How can we do this? Try to:

- Ñ Put others before yourself
- Ñ Check things out before jumping to conclusions, making assumptions, or reacting emotionally
- Ñ Give others the benefit of the doubt.

Suspension of belief is especially appropriate when others need to be understood in order for their tension or stress to be defused.

Think about suspending belief in these situations:

- Ñ A police officer who arrives on a violent scene where everyone has a weapon, but someone is declaring their innocence.
- Ñ A scene at work where workers are bullying a co-worker. The person who appears to be the victim, however, is a known bully.
- Ñ You put your lunch in the fridge when you arrived at work this morning, but when you look in your lunch bag, half the lunch is missing.
- Ñ You reach for the last loaf of bread in the bakery at the same time as someone else. The other person looks harried, but otherwise very similar to you.

Techniques for the Workplace

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

While not all conversations can be planned ahead (for example, sometimes we bump into someone in a hallway and the conversation starts, or we're just engaged in casual conversations), there are many conversations that benefit from a plan. When you prepare yourself before initiating a conversation, you are much more likely to deliver an effective message that doesn't get misunderstood, and to deliver it to the right person.

Have a purpose.

Typical purposes for a conversation are to inform or direct, to persuade, or to ask a question.

Have an outcome.

Ask yourself a few questions to help you decide how to approach the conversation:

- Ñ What reaction are you looking for from the listener?
- Ñ What do you need the listener to remember?
- Ñ What do you need the listener to do after your conversation?

Make sure the receiver is ready.

Some people resent it when we pounce on them unannounced. Others are much more receptive when you simply ask permission. If you are unsure if someone is ready to talk, try these helpful icebreakers:

- Ñ Is this a good time to talk?
- Ñ Can we talk about something I've been thinking about?
- Ñ Would now be a good time to talk, or should I come back later?
- Ñ Can I have 15 minutes of your time? (Just make sure you stick to only 15 minutes!)

Apply positive intent.

Positive intent means that you have good reasons for saying and doing what you do, and so do other people. If we assume that other people have negative intentions behind their actions, we can create a negative environment where that is the eventual outcome. This can make it very hard to work cooperatively. You will have to practice positive intention yourself and use your communication for good intentions, while assuming that others have that same positive intention.

This ultimately means that we avoid making negative assumptions and statements, that we avoid gossip, and that we focus on the future rather than the past.

Testing Our Theories

Situation One

Your supervisor calls you to say that he has chosen someone else for a project team position that you were hoping for. You love your current job, but you know you would have done a great job on that project team. Your first reaction is to be mad at your boss for being a jerk and not selecting you.

Using positive intent, think of a reason your boss would have selected someone else.

Situation Two

You are in a team meeting and you suggest a great solution to the problem. Your supervisor says that she cannot go in that direction, and asks the team for other suggestions.

Using positive intent, think of a reason your supervisor would have answered that way.

Delivering Your Message

Often, it's not so much what you say as how you say it. Let's look at some ways that you can deliver a clear, effective message.

Use direct language and deliver a message that is clear, calm, and direct. Be confident in your message. This means that your tone of voice, vocabulary, and rate of speech convey your feelings. Be careful not to back down (at least not immediately) if you are discussing something that is important to you. Be considerate of other people's ideas, but don't quickly give up on yours, especially when you have it all well thought out.

Factual descriptions and relevant details are more likely to be heard. Look at this generalization: Joe never gets his work finished. Compare it to something specific: Joe has not met his goals for an entire month.

Use **repetition** respectfully and to keep things on track. Conversations can easily get off track, especially if they get emotional or if someone is trying to steer the conversation away from what you felt was important. Don't be afraid to restate your purpose during an interaction.

Be as aware of your **non-verbal messages** as you are about your verbal messages. Also consider other people's communication style: are they direct or indirect? Passive or assertive? Make sure to also take into account their filters, assumptions, and beliefs. This will help you to keep your message clear.

Check for understanding.

You do not have to wait for the end of a conversation to make sure you and your conversation partner understand each other. You can check for understanding throughout the conversation to make sure that things are on track by using some of the following questions or statements.

- Ñ What do you think about what I just said?
- Ñ Let's summarize what we have covered so far.
- Ñ Please tell me what you're thinking.
- Ñ Does that make sense?
- Ñ If you were going to share this with the team, what would you say?
- Ñ What is not making sense here?

Ways to check for understanding:

Assertiveness**Self-Attitude**

Self-concept, self-image, and self-esteem can all impact the way that we send and receive messages. Individuals with low self-esteem and a negative self-image tend to operate in a passive style. Other people might think that they are superior to everyone else, resulting in an aggressive style. This creates all kinds of interesting conversations!

Words to Watch Out For

If you want to be known for clear communication, avoid words like:

- Ñ I'll try
- Ñ Ought to
- Ñ Should have
- Ñ Must
- Ñ Always
- Ñ Never

If you are tempted to insert these words into your conversations, replace them with clearer terms. Instead of "I'll try to get back to you later," say "I'll call you back by 4:00 today" (and then make sure that you do!).

Your Inner Self Talk

Be aware of the internal messages you give yourself. If you start from a negative self-concept and negative expectations, your external behavior will likely be non-assertive and you may end up feeling frustrated or angry. The more you replace your self-talk with positive, confident words, the more confident you become. We know that is easily said, and more difficult to realize, but it's worth the results! This helps you build credibility and trust with the people you speak with, since your words and actions will be congruent.

Persuasion

Expecting the best and knowing when to stop talking are probably two of the most important elements of persuading others. If we can't convince ourselves of something, it will be very difficult for us to persuade others.

Have you ever known another person who talked so much that other people stopped listening? These individuals overwhelm their listeners with conversation, until the listener becomes confused, bored, or both.

Mark Twain used to tell the following story that bears out that point:

"I was attending a meeting where a missionary had been invited to speak. I was deeply impressed. The preacher's voice was beautiful. He told us about the sufferings of the natives and he pleaded for help with such moving simplicity that I mentally doubled the 50 cents I was about to put in the plate.

"He described the pitiful misery of these poor people and I raised the amount again. Then as he continued, I felt that all the cash I carried on me would be insufficient, so I decided to write a large check.

"Then he went on. That preacher went on and on about the dreadful state of these poor natives and I abandoned the idea of a check. And still he went on. And I got back to a dollar, and then 50 cents. And still he went on. And when the plate finally came round...I took 10 cents out of it!"

The lesson: balance enthusiasm with control.

Thirty Ways to Persuade

1. Learn to link and connect with individual clients.
2. Demonstrate your expertise and knowledge.
3. Think fair/fair, not win/lose.
4. Be consistent and predictable.
5. Make sure integrity is reflected in your standards, values, and behavior.
6. Never assume they understand you.

7. Never assume they believe you.
8. Know when to be silent.
9. Tell the truth.
10. People believe exact numbers.
11. Show you have nothing to gain.
12. Flush out problems assertively.
13. Clients believe written words over verbal words. (Think about how sales pitches over the phone might be more suspicious than ones in person.)
14. Create an obligation for one or both parties.
15. Proceed a bit at a time, from inconsequential points into major areas.
16. Practice diffusion; show that you are out for the same things.
17. Never corner clients. Leave them a way out.
18. Give two options that are both acceptable to you, so that you win regardless of the choice. (Old sales trick!)
19. Play with innocent questions such as, “Why would you want to do that?”
20. Never accept an invitation to attack, since it creates a trust issue.
21. Exude charisma and read the auras of individuals.
22. Everyone is important and unique. Some literature says that you should treat all clients like they were an interesting guest on a TV talk show.
23. Don’t patronize.
24. Give sincere compliments.
25. Smile before you dial (or meeting someone in person).
26. Be childlike: open and transparent. Expand your center of interests to include others and explore the talents of others.
27. Use humor if appropriate.
28. Remember names.
29. Remember: difficult people don’t play by the same rules.
30. Practice strategic apologizing.

(Adapted from the *Secrets of Power Persuasion* by Roger Dawson)

Case Study: A Negative Image

Marlene’s Promotion

Marlene, a supervisor in a government department, managed a staff of twelve people. Over and over as a child she had heard her parents say, “Don’t ask such dumb questions,” and “What makes you think you know anything about that?” She was made a supervisor because for years she was a first class worker who never raised her voice and got along well with everybody in the department. She didn’t feel that she had good supervisory skills but she didn’t know how to turn down the promotion.

After being promoted, Marlene found her world falling apart. She disliked giving orders and couldn’t face on-the-job conflicts. She couldn’t bring herself to tell her employees what she thought when they voiced

an opinion different from hers, even though she felt she was right. She also found it impossible to criticize their below-standard work, even though it was getting worse under her supervision.

Her self-talk included, “I’m stupid,” and “I can’t make decisions.” Thus she did stupid things that resulted in her staff thinking less of her. She also took a long time to make decisions, so she was seen as wishy-washy.

Marlene decided to do something about her perception of herself, and to gain control over her internal and external image.

What steps would you suggest she take?

The Assertive Formula

I Messages

We are most likely to retain the goodwill of the person we're standing up to if we stick with our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and avoid direct or implied criticism of the other person. One way to do that is to stick with “I” messages, expressed in a matter-of-fact, non-judgmental tone of voice.

You Message	I Message
You talk too loudly.	I have sensitive hearing.
You should send out an agenda.	I'd like to know what we're going to discuss in the meeting tomorrow so I can bring the right information with me.

You can use this same type of message when you are giving feedback about someone else's behavior. Again, the feedback should be non-judgmental, and it should be specific.

The Assertive Formula

There is also a formula for assertiveness:

Step	Goal	Example
Step 1	Non-judgmentally describe a specific behavior of the other person.	When you...
Step 2	Describe, as specifically as possible, the effects this behavior is having, or the practical problems it is causing in your life.	The effects are...
Step 3	Describe how you feel as a result, without using the expression, “you make me...”	I feel...
Step 4	You describe what you want, preferably after you give the other person a chance to state what they think might be done.	I prefer/would like...

Example: “When you leave your papers all over my office, it causes it to be cluttered and I feel disorganized and upset. I would like it if you could pick your papers up when you are done.”

When you are stating feelings, remember these tips:

- Ñ State feelings, not evaluations
- Ñ State feelings, not solutions
- Ñ State feelings directly

Expressing Your No

Once you understand the request and decide you want to say no, choose the kind of no that best suits the person and situation. Here are some general rules to follow.

Say no **firmly and calmly**, without saying, “I’m sorry,” which weakens your position.

Say no, followed by a **straightforward explanation** of what you are feeling or what you are willing to do.

- Ñ “I’m uncomfortable doing that.”
- Ñ “I’m not willing to do that.”
- Ñ “I don’t want to do that.”
- Ñ “I don’t like to do that.”

Say no, and then give a **choice or alternative**.

- Ñ “I can’t help you now, but I will when I get this done, which could be in an hour.”
- Ñ “I don’t have time today, but I could help out the first thing tomorrow morning.”

Say no and then **clarify your reasons**. This does not include long-winded statements filled with excuses, justifications, and rationalizations. It's enough that you do not want to say yes. Your clarification is given to provide the receiver more information so that they can better understand your position.

Use your **natural no**. You may have developed your own style of saying no based on your past experience and personality. If so, use it.

Make an **empathetic listening statement** and then say no. You may paraphrase the content and feeling of the request, and then state your no.

Example: "I can see that it is important to you that one of my assistants gets your report done. I'd like to have someone do it, but my staff is already overburdened with high priority tasks to be completed by the end of the day."

Say yes, and then give your **reasons for not doing it or your alternative solution**. This approach is very interesting. You may want to use it in situations when you are willing to meet the request, but not at the time or in the way the other person wants it.

- Ñ "Yes, I would be willing to help you out, but I won't have time until tomorrow afternoon."
- Ñ "Yes, I could have part of your report typed, but not all forty pages."
- Ñ "Yes, I'd be willing to go along with your second alternative, but not the third one you suggested."

The Persistent Response

You can also use the persistent response. This method of saying no entails using a one-sentence refusal statement and persistently repeating it as often as necessary, no matter what the person says. This technique is useful when dealing with very aggressive or manipulative people who won't take no for an answer. It is especially useful to assist you in moving from the passive mode to the assertive mode, as it gives you a specific format to follow. This is also useful for moving yourself away from the extreme aggressive end of the continuum if you are apt to lose control and become verbally abusive. The persistent response can be effective in maintaining your refusal while continuing to be in charge of your emotions.

Because this way of saying no is unusual and a bit complex, we will provide some detailed guidelines for applying it.

First, select a concise, one-sentence statement and repeat it no matter what the other person says or does. Examples:

- Ñ "I understand how you feel, but I'm not willing..."
- Ñ "I'm not interested..."

- Ñ “I don’t want to...”
- Ñ “I’m uncomfortable doing that, so I don’t want to...”
- Ñ “You might be right, but I’m not interested”.

After each statement by the other person, say your persistent response sentence. It’s important that you don’t get sidetracked by responding to any other issue the other person brings up.

Guidelines for Saying No

Say your statement **firmly, calmly, and as unemotionally** as possible.

Be aware of your **non-verbal behavior**, making sure you don’t come across passively or aggressively. Use plenty of silence to your advantage. Your silence will project the message that the other’s statements and manipulation are futile.

Be **persistent**. Simply state your response one more time than the other person makes his or her request, question, or statement. If the other person makes six statements, you make seven. If the other person makes three statements, you make four. Most often, the other person will feel ill at ease and stop after three or four statements. Other times, your response will move the other person to offer options you are willing to go along with.

Further Reading:

Cava, Roberta. Difficult People. Key Porter Books, 1992.

Cialdini, Robert. Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion. Collins, 2006.

Davis, Martha, Patrick Fanning, and McKay Matthew. Messages: The Communication Skills Book. New Harbinger Publications, 1995.