

Effective Communication

Improving Communication Skills in Business and Relationships

Lawrence Robinson, Jeanne Segal, Ph. D., and Robert Segal, M.A.

Effective communication helps us better understand a person or situation and enables us to resolve differences, build trust and respect, and create environments where creative ideas, problem solving, affection, and caring can flourish. As simple as communication seems, much of what we try to communicate to others—and what others try to communicate to us—gets misunderstood, which can cause conflict and frustration in personal and professional relationships. By learning these effective communication skills, you can better connect with your spouse, kids, friends, and coworkers.

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What is effective communication?

In the information age, we have to send, receive, and process huge numbers of messages every day. But effective communication is about more than just exchanging information; it's also about understanding the emotion behind the information. Effective communication can improve relationships at home, work, and in social situations by deepening your connections to others and improving teamwork, decision-making, and problem solving. It enables you to communicate even negative or difficult messages without creating conflict or destroying trust. Effective communication combines a set of skills including nonverbal communication, attentive listening, the ability to manage stress in the moment, and the capacity to recognize and understand your own emotions and those of the person you're communicating with.

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.

Effective communication skills #1: Listening

Listening is one of the most important aspects of effective communication. Successful listening means not just understanding the words or the information being communicated, but also understanding how the speaker feels about what they're communicating.

Effective listening can:

- Make the speaker feel heard and understood, which can help build a stronger, deeper connection between you.
- Create an environment where everyone feels safe to express ideas, opinions, and feelings, or plan and problem solve in creative ways.
- Save time by helping clarify information, avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.
- Relieve negative emotions. When emotions are running high, if the speaker feels that he or she has been truly heard, it can help to calm them down, relieve negative feelings, and allow for real understanding or problem solving to begin.

Tips for effective listening

- If your goal is to fully understand and connect with the other person, listening effectively will often come naturally. If it doesn't, you can remember 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, and other nonverbal cues. If you're daydreaming, checking text messages, or doodling, you're almost certain to miss nonverbal cues in the conversation. 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.

- 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.
- Avoid seeming judgmental. 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.
- 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.”

Effective communication skills #2: Nonverbal communication

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

- Practice observing people in public places, such as a shopping mall, bus, train, café, restaurant, or even on a television talk show with the sound muted. Observing how others use body language can teach you how to better receive and use nonverbal signals when conversing with others. Notice how people act and react to each other. Try to guess what their relationship is, what they’re talking about, and how each feels about what is being said.
- 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 to 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.

Effective communication skills #3: Managing stress

In small doses, stress can help you perform under pressure. However, when stress becomes constant and overwhelming, it can hamper effective communication by disrupting your capacity to think clearly and creatively, and act appropriately. 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.

When stress strikes, you can't always temper it by taking time out to meditate or go for a run, especially if you're in the middle of a meeting with your boss or an argument with your spouse, for example. 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.

Effective communication skills #4: Emotional awareness

Learn to recognize & accept your emotions

Emotions play an important role in the way we communicate at home and work. It's the way you feel, more than the way you think, that motivates you to communicate or to make decisions. The way you react to emotionally driven nonverbal cues, affects both how you understand other people and how they understand you. If you are out of touch with your feelings, and don't understand how you feel or why you feel that way, you'll have a hard time communicating your feelings and needs to others. This can result in frustration, misunderstandings, and conflict. When you don't address what's really bothering you, you often become embroiled in petty squabbles instead—arguing with your spouse about how the towels should be hung, for example, or with a coworker about whose turn it is to restock the copier.

Emotional awareness provides you the tools needed for understanding both yourself and other people, and the real messages they are communicating to you. Although knowing your own feelings may seem simple, many people ignore or try to sedate strong emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. But your ability to communicate depends on being connected to these feelings. If you're afraid of strong emotions or if you insist on communicating only on a rational level, it will impair your ability to fully understand others, creatively problem solve, resolve conflicts, or build an affectionate connection with someone.

How emotional awareness can improve effective communication

Emotional awareness—the consciousness of your moment-to-moment emotional experience—and the ability to manage all of your feelings appropriately is the basis for effective communication.

Emotional awareness helps you:

- Understand and empathize with what is really troubling other people
- Understand yourself, including what's really troubling you and what you really want
- Stay motivated to understand and empathize with the person you're interacting with, even if you don't like them or their message
- Communicate clearly and effectively, even when delivering negative messages
- Build strong, trusting, and rewarding relationships, think creatively, solve problems, and resolve conflicts
- Effective communication requires both thinking and feeling

When emotional awareness is strongly developed, you'll know what you're feeling without having to think about it—and you'll be able to use these emotional cues to understand what someone is really communicating to you and act accordingly. The goal of effective communication is to find a healthy balance between your intellect and your emotions, between thinking and feeling.