

Life Skills

Developing Skills for Life's Challenges

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COMMUNICATION

Effective Communication Helps Life Work

Communication is a skill that is basic to life. It is as important as any of the other skills by which you make your living or way through life. In fact, experts believe success in business or career is 85% dependent on effective communication and interpersonal skills. Your ability to communicate largely influences your relationships, value at work, and personal happiness.

Effective communication helps life work. It is amazing how much of our time is spent communicating. It is estimated that 50% of the average worker's time is spent communicating, and that 70% of mistakes made in the workplace can be attributed to poor communication. Many relationship difficulties can similarly be attributed to misunderstanding.

Listening is one important aspect of communication. Listening accurately is key to effectiveness at work. It is also an essential skill for building relationships. If you are a good listener, others are drawn to you. People who don't listen are bores. They don't seem interested in anyone but themselves. It is dangerous not to listen effectively!

Self-Disclosure (communicating information about yourself) is another important aspect of communication. Self-disclosure makes relationships interesting and builds closeness. You cannot help disclosing yourself. You do it whenever you are around other people—by your words or by your silence and posture. The question isn't whether to disclose yourself, but how to do it appropriately and effectively.

A third aspect of communication is **expressing** yourself—your ideas, questions, desires, etc. Making clear and complete statements about your observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs are critical to living.

And finally, we should not underestimate the importance of **non-verbal** communication ("body language"). Experts estimate 75% of a message is communicated non-verbally. Without saying a word, you communicate your feelings and attitudes. Your smile says "I'm happy," and your frown and crossed arms say "I'm angry."

Good communication skills are essential to marriage, parenting, friendship, and your career. The time and effort you spend focusing on, evaluating, and improving your communication skills may yield big dividends.

For Help or Information:

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- Growth Oriented Psychotherapy
- Assessments and Testing
- Counseling
- Consultations
- Workshops
- Coaching

Dr. Morgan is a psychologist in private practice in Paoli, PA. His approach to counseling and therapy is growth-oriented, emphasizing gaining the skills needed to handle life's challenges.

EXPRESSING NEGATIVE FEELINGS

Negative emotions are not necessarily expressed to hurt someone. Appropriately expressed negative feelings (anger, frustration, hurt, disappointment) do not contain accusation or aggression—they convey one's own hurt rather than inflicting hurt. Appropriate expressions are non-blaming, spontaneous rather than saved up, direct, assertive, and descriptive rather than judgemental. Avoid "**you**" messages such as "You always..." or "You make me so mad!" Instead, use an "**I feel**" message like "I feel angry" or "I feel put down."

To form an "I feel" message:

1. Describe the behavior of the other person that has led to your negative feeling ("**When you**...").

2. Describe your negative feeling ("**I feel**...").

3. Make a request that might improve the situation and your feelings by asking the other to change words or actions in the future, for help, or for time to reach a resolution of the problem ("**Could you please**...").

Such expressions of negative feelings are less likely to arouse defensiveness and bad feelings on the part of the person you are communicating with, and therefore have a better chance of leading to constructive change.

Practical Ways to Improve Communication

- ◆ Focus on being a better listener.
- ◆ Suspend judgement and try to fully understand the other person before drawing conclusions.
- ◆ Give listening signals. Let the other know you are being attentive.
- ◆ Don't interrupt. Refrain from voicing your views until the other has stopped.
- ◆ Ask questions skillfully. Phrase, time, and select your questions well.
- ◆ Use diplomacy and tact. Exercise awareness and sensitivity when discussing touchy areas.
- ◆ Deliver honest compliments and strokes—the more specific, the better.
- ◆ Be direct—don't talk in circles, or ambiguously.
- ◆ Eliminate nagging, insults, sarcasm, and hurtful criticism.

VALIDATING FEELINGS

One reason communication stalls rather than progresses to problem resolution or greater intimacy is because we intentionally or unintentionally invalidate the other person's feelings. Often it is our natural response to speak hastily or insensitively, rather than to take the time and effort to validate the other person's feelings before expressing our own views. Some typical invalidating habits include:

1. **Defending**—"The reason I did that was. . ."
2. **Attacking**—"Well, maybe you're right, but why did you. . ."
3. **Correcting**—"There's no need to feel. . ."
4. **Advising**—"Maybe you should..."

These responses leave the other person feeling that they have not been heard, or that their feelings do not matter to you—they feel snubbed. To facilitate and deepen communication, give attention to accepting and validating the other person's feelings before expressing your views—even if you disagree with the other person. Strive to demonstrate respect, esteem, desire to understand, and acceptance. Some ways to accept and validate another's feelings include reflecting the feeling you are perceiving back to the other person, clarifying the feeling, or exploring the feeling. Basically these techniques involve mirroring in your own words what you understand the other to be saying.

1. **Reflecting**—"It sounds as if you feel . . ." "You're feeling hurt because. . ."
2. **Clarifying**—"Are you saying that. . .?" "I'm wondering if you mean that . . ."
3. **Exploring**—"I'm not sure what you mean..." "You really felt... did you also feel...?"

Responses such as these invite further interaction and help the other person feel that they are heard and understood. They encourage the speaker to state more clearly what the issue is. Once an issue is keenly understood, solutions are easier to find, or greater intimacy is shared.

Credit goes to Lawrence Crabb, Ph.D. for some of the ideas in this section.

ASSERTIVENESS

Assertive communication is an important skill. Assertiveness is honest communication. Assertive people stand up for their own rights without ignoring the rights of others. In contrast, passive (non-assertive) or aggressive (hostile) communication impede relationships, are often self-defeating, and have frustrating results.

Passive communication often involves apologetic words, veiled meanings, hedging and failing to come to a point. You may feel at a loss for words, fail to come to a point, and hope someone will guess what you want. Or, you may look as if you don't mean what you say. There may be inappropriate smiling or nervous laughter.

Aggressive communication involves "loaded," blaming words and accusations. Also, often the speaker uses imperious, superior words. There may be an exaggerated show of strength, or flippant, sarcastic style.

Assertive communication makes honest statements of wants and feelings. It uses direct statements which say what you mean and get to the point.

There is generally an assured manner, communicating concern, strength, and firmness while being polite and relaxed.

In most (not all) situations, assertive communication is the most desirable. Failing to express needs and wants openly can lead to anger and friction in relationships. People would generally prefer you to say what you want or need rather than keep silent and harbor resentment and frustration toward them. Similarly, aggressive communication stirs up bad feelings, defensiveness, and "responding in kind"—resulting in a breakdown in communication.

Finding Help. If you have difficulty being assertive, or with any other aspect of communication, you may find help in a seminar, book, or through professional counseling. Counseling or therapy can be a valuable experience that leads to personal growth and gaining better skills for handling life's challenges. Benefits include not only overcoming a significant problem or making an important change, but a learning and growth experience developing skills for a lifetime.