



Communication Tips For a Happier Workplace

Poll any group of employees—from the mailroom to the upper levels of management - and you'll find poor workplace communication as one of the top organizational complaints. For something that we do every day, we just don't seem to be very good at it. In fact, the attitude that communication should come naturally may be contributing to the problem, since workplace communication remains one of the most overlooked and untrained job skills.

Although most employees have little control over their companies' communication processes, all of us contribute to the quality of our workplace communication through our interactions with our coworkers. Here are a few tips to improve communication in your own corner of the workplace.

It's not what you say; it's how you say it.

The same message can be interpreted in vastly different ways depending on the tone in which it is delivered. Always strive to keep communication positive and polite. A negative, accusatory, or aggressive tone tends to put the listener on the defensive, causing the underlying message to be distorted or not heard at all.

Know your audience.

Effective communication starts with observation. Because not everyone communicates in the same manner, knowing and mimicking your coworkers' individual styles can vastly improve your communication with them. While a brusque, to-the-point style may work with a type-A personality, it may seem rude and impersonal to someone who likes to make polite small-talk before getting down to business. Knowing and adapting to these styles can make all the difference.

Timing is sometimes the most critical part of delivering your message. If you require someone's full attention for a length of time, it is often helpful to schedule a time to meet instead of approaching that person when he or she is focused on other things. Sometimes this can be done in an informal manner by requesting that someone see you when time permits.

Just the facts, ma'am.

Many a meeting has been derailed by the one or two participants who seem unable to limit their input to the subject at hand. Before speaking, envision topical bullet points and limit your comments to them. If you find yourself veering off course or notice others looking at their watches as you speak, wrap it up by briefly summarizing your main points.

Limit your message list.

Nothing is more frustrating than being copied on an e-mail chain about a topic that doesn't concern you. Abuse of the "copy all" function reduces productivity, creates confusion, and eventually causes employees to disregard important communications because they no longer have the time to filter relevant information from the avalanche of information overflowing from their in-boxes. Before hitting the send button, mentally verify that each person on the copy list needs access to the information contained within.

Always follow up.

Never assume that an electronic message has been received. Digital information can be lost in transmission or accidentally deleted by the person receiving it. Make a habit of regularly following up on important communications.

Give frequent updates.

It's easy to lose perspective when working on large-scale projects that aren't due for completion until months later. Schedule daily, weekly, or monthly summaries of work in progress in order to keep superiors, coworkers, and subordinates up to date and aware of changes that may affect them.

Never say "no" as a first response

No one likes to be told no. When asked to perform a task that may take you away from other important work, inform the requestor of the time or expense the task will take to accomplish, and the effect it will have on your previously scheduled projects. Armed with this information, the requestor will be able to draw his or her own conclusions about whether to proceed, and is less likely to focus on your perceived "unwillingness" to do the work.