

Communication skills & conflict handling

What is communication all about?

Effective communication is central to all organisations and teams. A great deal of the effectiveness depends on the people in the organisation or team. Unfortunately many people do not communicate effectively, which leads to low productivity and poor interpersonal relationships. That is why it is important to know and understand the basics of communication.



Word wizard: What is communication?

Communication can be defined as a two-way process whereby information (the message) is sent from one person (the sender) through a channel to another person (the receiver), who in turn reacts by providing feedback. The sender is the person who initiates the communication and formulates the message, usually to convey information. The receiver is the person to whom the sender directs the message and takes an active part in the communication process. He/she is responsible for making sense of, interpreting and reacting to the message.

Effective communication has several advantages:

- Better interpersonal relationships
- Saving time and money
- More effective decision-making
- Successful problem solving
- Increased productivity

Effective team functioning and communication therefore go hand in hand.

The enemy: Communication barriers

Successful interpersonal communication is much more complex than it seems (in theory). We can never just assume that communication is effective. There are always factors that disturb, confuse and distort the message the sender wants to bring across. Such factors compete against communication and prevent a message from being received – this is called a communication barrier, noise or interference.

The factors can be divided into the following main categories:

Physical barriers

- Refers to a physical noise that you can hear
- For example: an indistinct/vague telephone line or traffic noise in the background

Physiological barriers

- Refers to poor health, physical disability, pain or discomfort
- For example: sitting on hard, uncomfortable seats for a long time, poor eyesight or hearing, high temperatures and humidity, a severe headache

Psychological barriers

- Refers to a psychological state like anger, depression, fear, nervousness, boredom or distrust, further affected by a positive/negative attitude on the part of the sender or the receiver
- For example: a relationship of fear between a team leader and the team members, a worker with a poor self-image, a nervous worker who tries too hard to impress

Perceptual barriers

- People of different backgrounds, cultures, sex, personality, education and interests see the world differently and understand situations and simple communication messages differently
- Issues that people interpret differently influence the way they interpret communication
- For example: etiquette about eating habits, the role of women, working with people vs. working with numbers and coming across as unfriendly, an impulsive employee working for a patient boss, religious beliefs and holidays

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Semantic barriers

- Refers to meanings of words that are misunderstood or when different meanings are attached to a specific word or expression
- For example: vague wording such as “as soon as possible” or “be there early”, slang words like “cool” or “jol”, subject-specific language (jargon)

How to overcome communication barriers

- Use face-to-face communication where possible
- Be sensitive to other people’s backgrounds
- Use direct, unambiguous and simple language
- Avoid subjective, emotional language
- Establish a relationship of trust between the receiver and the sender
- Be open-minded and open to suggestions
- Get rid of your defensive attitudes
- Be a good listener

A match made in heaven: Communication and good language skills

It is nearly impossible to provide a set list of rules to improve your oral communication. However, it is possible to improve your language usage. In this section we will focus on the clarity and appropriateness of your language. Being conscious of these two aspects should improve your interaction with people in your team and even in your personal life.

Clear language

- Unclear language results in misunderstandings. These misunderstandings could be avoided simply by the use of more specific and precise words. You must always make sure that your choice of words reflects exactly what you want to say.
- Think of the word “said”. There are many words you can substitute for “said”, e.g. “stated”, “indicated”, “suggested”, “shouted” or “pleaded”. All of these words have a slightly different and more precise meaning – you must make sure the word you use will have the right effect on the listener.
- Another way to avoid vagueness and ambiguity is to use a concrete example to make your meaning clearer, e.g. “Jan is very loyal to his company – he always buys their products.”

Appropriate language

- Appropriateness means you adapt your language so that it is suitable for the people you are communicating with and to the context of the conversation. Your choice of words must be meaningful to your listeners.
- You have to take demographic factors such as the age, background, gender, interests and needs of your recipients into account, as well as the communication occasion, e.g. a meeting versus a formal conversation.
- This also implies that you don't use slang or jargon (subject-specific language that only the people who are involved in that area can understand).

Vocabulary building

- You can improve the clarity and appropriateness of your language by increasing your vocabulary. The more words you have at your command, the more precisely you will be able to express yourself. You will also be able to avoid overused words such as “nice”, “good” and “bad”.
- You can increase your vocabulary by attentively listening to the radio, TV and other conversations, and by reading books.

Key communication skills

Attentiveness

To be an effective team leader, it is essential to pay attention. Teams respond well when their leader makes the effort to pay attention to them. It shows that you value your team members and want to help them achieve their goals.



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The following guidelines will communicate to your team that you are paying attention:

DO	DON'T
Position your body so that you face all members	Turn your back to part of the group
Smile at individuals	Frown or look judgemental
Listen and watch carefully while they talk	Shuffle papers or look at your watch
Keep eye contact	Avoid eye contact or stare at individuals
Nod affirmatively	Remain impassive
Talk with all group members	Talk only to a few people

Listening

Listening is a fundamental skill for team leaders. It requires accurately hearing what someone says and verifying the information. There are however some listening pitfalls that must be kept in mind.

Poor listening habits

Lots of people never learn to listen well because they develop poor listening habits that they keep for life. To become a better listener, you can identify which poor listening habits you have and make an effort to change them:

- *Not paying attention:* Being distracted or thinking of something else, not wanting to listen.
- *Pseudo-listening:* Looking as though you are listening while you are thinking of something else; important information or instructions are consequently falsely accepted as heard.
- *Hearing, but not listening:* Hearing only the facts or details, but missing the real meaning.
- *Rehearsing:* Listening until you want to say something, then stopping to listen, starting to rehearse what you want to say and waiting for an opportunity to say it.
- *Interrupting:* Not waiting until the complete meaning can be determined, interrupting forcefully.
- *Hearing what is expected:* Hearing what you expected the speaker would say, refusing to hear what you do not want to hear.
- *Feeling defensive:* Assuming you know the speaker's intention or why something was said, and consequently expect to be attacked.
- *Listening for a point of disagreement:* Waiting for a chance to disagree with and attack someone.

Positive listening habits

In contrast to poor listening habits, positive listening habits lead to effective listening. Remember that active and effective listening nourishes relationships in any and all contexts and shows that you respect the person.

- *Paying attention:* Force yourself to pay attention to the speaker. Make an effort to not be distracted by other things. Use nonverbal cues (e.g. eye contact, nodding, smiling) to let the speaker know he/she is being heard.
- *Listening for the whole message:* Look for meaning and consistency in the verbal as well as the nonverbal messages. Listen for ideas, feelings and intentions as well as facts.
- *Hearing before evaluating:* Listen to what someone says without drawing premature conclusions. Question the speaker in a non-accusing manner – don't give advice to the speaker, or judge the speaker.
- *Paraphrasing what was heard:* Repeat the words of the speaker in your own words in a non-judgmental way and ask if that is what was meant.
- *Don't get personal:* Direct your reaction to the message, not to the person.

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Questioning

Questions play a major role in facilitation. They invite participation and get people to think about an issue from a different perspective. There are three questioning elements that you need to master to manage your team effectively:

Open-ended questions

Asking open-ended questions is one of the most important skills you need as team leader – it leads to more complete responses from the team and more effective participation.

Type of question	Description	Example
Closed	Requires a one-word answer, such as “yes” or “no” Closes off discussion Usually begins with “is”, “can”, “how many” or “does”	“Does everyone understand the changes we’ve discussed?”
Open-ended	Requires more than a “yes” or “no” answer Usually begins with “what”, “how”, “when” or “why” Stimulates thinking Leads to discussion	“What ideas do you have for making the process more time efficient?”

Phrasing questions

DO	DON'T
Ask clear, concise questions covering a single issue	Ask rambling, ambiguous questions that cover more than one issue
Ask challenging questions that will trigger thought	Ask questions that don't provide an opportunity for thought
Ask reasonable questions based on what they know	Ask questions that most of them don't know the answers to
Ask honest and relevant questions	Ask “trick” questions designed to fool them

Directing questions

There are two ways to direct questions: either to everyone in the group or to a specific person. These guidelines will help you direct questions appropriately.

If you want to...	Then...
Stimulate everyone's thinking	Direct the question to the group
Allow them to respond voluntarily or avoid putting an individual on the spot	Ask a question like: "What experiences have any of you had with this problem?"
Stimulate one person to think and respond	Direct the question to that individual
Tap the known resources of an "expert" in the group	Direct the question to him/her: "Tony, you have had lot of experience in applying these regulations with customers. What would you do in this case?"

How to handle answers to questions

The way you handle questions will not only affect the individual who gave the answer, but it will also affect the amount of participation from the other team members.

- Always reinforce answers positively. Use positive reinforcement such as "What a useful observation".
- Acknowledge the effort of the respondent, whatever answer is given. For example, start by saying "Thanks for the idea".
- Minimise potential embarrassment for wrong or incomplete answers. Reinforce the part that is correct, then ask the question again or redirect it to someone else. For example, "You are on the right track. What other ideas do you have?"



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Giving and receiving feedback

Within the team context there are many opportunities for the team leader and the members to give and receive feedback. There needs to be an environment where giving, receiving and asking for feedback is acceptable and beneficial.

Useful and constructive feedback:

- *Given with a reason:* By checking whether there's a good reason for giving feedback, you can make sure it will help the recipient.
- *Given with care:* The giver must feel concern for the receiver – to want to help rather than hurt the recipient.
- *Invited by the recipient:* Feedback is most effective when the recipient has invited the comments. This leads to openness and gives the recipient an opportunity to identify and explore particular areas of concern.
- *Expressed directly:* Good feedback is direct, specific, clear and concrete. General or vague comments about an issue are of little value. Also, consider whether the feedback is best given in front of others, or privately.
- *Uncluttered by evaluative judgements:* Feedback must not contain judgements or evaluations, such as assuming the other person's motivations or intentions. Rather describe the behaviour than judge it.
- *Well-timed:* The most useful feedback is given when the recipient is receptive to it and when the incident of behaviour that is discussed is still fresh in his/her mind.
- *Easily acted on:* Useful feedback deals with behaviour that can be changed. It is helpful to suggest alternative ways of behaving that allow the recipient to think about new ways of tackling old problems.

Furthermore, the team can agree on the following when they receive feedback:

- Look at the person giving the feedback.
- Ask for specifics and examples if they are not provided.
- Paraphrase to make sure the feedback was understood.

Body language

- Body language is a non-verbal, international and inter-cultural “language”. It means conveying messages to others by using different parts of your body.
- Body language is a very important part of communication because it transcends all language and most cultural barriers
- How often do people misunderstand what they say to each other, even when they converse in their home language? This is where body language can assist in the process.
- Some elements of body language are part of our genetic make-up (e.g. getting “goose bumps” when we are cold or afraid). Other elements are learned from our environment (e.g. shaking a clenched fist at someone when we are angry).
- Being able to interpret body language is an important tool to use when recognising silent signals from others and sending your own messages.

Body language is an effective communication tool to help:

- create and stimulate interest
- promote a more relaxed atmosphere
- convey acceptance or agreement
- eliminate perceived or real threats
- remove barriers
- reduce nervousness
- build trust



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Common body language signals that you can learn to recognise:

- *acceptance/agreement*: smiling/hand-clapping/head-nodding/“thumbs up” sign
- *anger*: clenched fists/teeth; either going red or pale in the face
- *arrogance*: appearing aloof/lack of warmth/lack of eye contact
- *boredom*: fidgeting/yawning/tapping fingers/gazing away from the speaker
- *confidence*: a firm handshake (in Western culture)/smiling with eye contact
- *disagreement*: head-shaking (although this may mean agreement for some Indians)
- *disbelief/surprise*: rolling eyes upwards/frowning/shrugging shoulders/eyes wide
- *embarrassment*: hiding face/dropping head/blushing/turning away
- *evasiveness*: eyes darting from side to side/fidgeting/not replying when spoken to
- *excitement*: nodding/sitting forward/jumping up/rapid eye movement/waving
- *impatience*: finger-tapping/fidgeting/looking at the time
- *insincerity*: use of ‘plastic’ (forced) smiles
- *interest*: tilting forward when listening/direct eye contact/close body space
- *nervousness*: perspiring/pacing up and down/fidgeting/fiddling
- *puzzlement*: frowning/screwing up eyes and pursing lips
- *rejection*: arms folded across chest/turning your back on someone
- *rudeness*: avoiding eye contact/not smiling/acting ‘deaf’
- *submissiveness/respect*: a soft handshake/avoiding direct eye contact
- *thoughtfulness*: silence/expressionless face/distant or vacant eyes
- *worry*: frowning/pursed lips/sucking in air/rubbing hands/forehead on hand



Something to think about: General tips for improving communication

- *Set a climate where people can express their feelings openly – people will understand more about what’s going on and speculation will shrink.*
- *Communicate with spontaneity, not hidden strategies.*
- *Demonstrate empathy – try to walk in the other person’s shoes.*
- *Promote equality across and within levels.*
- *Try to hear all sides of a debate, don’t simply stick to your own agenda.*

The role of culture in communication

- Culture comprises elements of behaviour, such as language, religion, values and customs, that are shared by a group. It includes the things people believe in and the way they do them.
- Culture is learned from childbirth. It is not inherited but acquired from the environment in which you grow up. In any one country there can be more than one cultural group and within this, there could also be a number of sub-cultures.
- Cultural elements include
 - the way you dress
 - the way you eat and what you eat
 - your attitude to time, work and colleagues
 - your language, beliefs, attitudes, values and norms
 - the way you communicate
- The part of culture that determines the way we communicate is what is of relevance to us: Differences in cultural communication can lead to conflict.
- One way to prevent such conflict is to be culturally sensitive. We should be aware of other approaches and ways of life and communicating. Each culture gives its members “rules” about what is allowed in that culture and what not – and we need to respect that.



Something to think about: Subconscious culture

The most important (and potentially the most dangerous) influence is that part of our culture of which we are unaware. That is the part we accept as being universal. In other words, we believe everyone else feels the same way about certain issues, that everyone will admire certain characteristics and that everyone will reject certain actions, or find them offensive. This portion of culture (the subconscious part) is dangerous because it leads to conflict and strife.



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Word wizard: Stereotyping

Stereotyping is when we presume that someone has a certain set of characteristics because he or she comes from a certain culture. We make a distinction between “us” and “them”. These distinctions often lie in our subconscious mind and the people who stereotype are mostly unaware of their irrational distinctions.

Research shows that we have a psychological need to classify and categorise. The world around us is too big, too complicated and too dynamic, so we want to create order by classifying and labelling people and groups.

We can form positive stereotypes, for example “Doctors really care about their fellow human beings”. Such stereotypes are not dangerous – it is the negative stereotypes that pose a danger. They mostly oversimplify, over-generalise and over-exaggerate. Negative stereotypes represent a lazy way of forming perceptions. If you are unable to understand another’s cultural orientation, you make it easier for yourself by saying, “What do you expect? He is a Xhosa, a Boer, an Englishman, Jewish”, and so on.

Negative stereotypes are unreasonable and ungrounded: There are many different personalities, temperaments, fancies and traits among people of the same culture. We should respect these differences. By not having a misperception of culture as presented by stereotyping, can prevent a lot of conflict.



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Cultural indicators

For a better understanding of cultural differences and to learn to be culturally sensitive, we need to learn more about these differences. To do this, we can take a look at examples of cultural indicators:

- *Dress*

Traditional dress for men and women reflects religion, climate and modesty values, for example some Muslim women being covered from head to toe. There is much evidence of cross-cultural dress trends, for example the spread of Western (American) influence, such as the use of denim.

- *Eating*

In Western culture, cutlery such as knives, forks and spoons are used to eat. In African and many Eastern cultures bare hands are used. Muslims only use their right hand for eating. Various cultures have strict eating taboos. For example, Muslims and Jews don't eat pork and Hindus don't eat beef.

- *Attitudes, values and norms*

There is an overlap of attitudes adopted by most major cultures, but a few differ between cultures. Some cultures highly respect women, while others see them as inferior to men. Colours also mean different things, e.g. in Western culture white indicates purity; to the Chinese it symbolises sorrow.

- *Time-keeping*

Different cultures see the importance of time-keeping differently, mainly because of lifestyle. In rural Africa communities' activities are determined by the position of the sun during the day. In an urban, industrial society strict time schedules are important because of people having meetings and trains and planes departing at specific times.

- *Physical contact and emotion*

Most communal cultures do not approve of a display of physical contact or emotion. Eye contact also varies between cultures: In traditional African culture eye contact is avoided. In some traditional Muslim communities eye contact between unmarried women and men is taboo.



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Reality check: Cultural misunderstandings

Sarah Jones was an outgoing and friendly person, always in a rush. She would greet her colleagues, no matter how senior their position might be, with a quick “hi and bye” and not stop to chat. Three months after her promotion to the position of team leader in a department with mostly black staff, people were saying that she was racist and difficult to work with. This was because sociability is very important to Africans, e.g. friendliness, politeness, sense of humour and spending time with someone. Only after both sides were made aware of their cultural differences and Sarah realised her “hi and bye” greetings were offensive, could they make peace.

The reality of conflict

All teams eventually run into conflict. It is simply inevitable – and that is why team leaders have to be prepared to deal with it. There are many possible causes of conflict:

- *Unmet needs and wants*

This can refer to physical needs (enough sleep, time to relax) or psychological needs (need for recognition, affection and affiliation)

- *Different values and background*

Values are the ultimate driving force behind our behaviour; it includes our thoughts and feelings on time, money, work, health, etc. Our values are largely determined by our background – the way we grew up. This includes messages about how to deal with others and with conflict.

- *Perceptions*

We filter everything we see and hear around us and select what has meaning for us; for example, people have different perceptions about urgency or about money management.

- *Knowledge*

Each team member should identify and acknowledge the resources they bring to the team in the form of education, training and experience. Withholding some of this knowledge can cause conflict – members should regularly share what they know so that everyone is “on the same page”.

- *Assumptions*

We make assumptions based on what we know, e.g. someone is late for a meeting and we assume he/she doesn't value the team's time. This should be checked for accuracy to avoid related conflict.

- *Expectations*

Members' expectations should be clarified at the beginning. If shared, members can try to meet each other's expectations better.

- *Willingness and ability to deal with conflict*

Many people avoid dealing with conflict, for various reasons (e.g. negative connotations with conflict, little experience of successfully dealing with conflict, have not had an opportunity to learn to deal with it). All people can however learn to deal with conflict through reading, training and coaching. The secret is not to resist, as that makes finding solutions virtually impossible.

The first step: Debates vs. arguments

Every team leader should know the difference between a debate and an argument, because healthy debate is essential to make effective decisions while dysfunctional arguments lead to disaster.

In healthy debates	In dysfunctional arguments
People are open to hearing other's ideas.	People assume they're right.
People listen and respond to ideas even if they don't agree with them.	People wait until others have finished talking, then state their ideas without responding to the ideas of the other person.
Everyone tries to understand the views of the other person.	No one is interested in how the other person sees the situation.
People stay objective and focus on the facts.	People get personally attacked and blamed.
There's a systematic approach to analysing the situation and looking for solutions.	Hot topics get thrashed out in an unstructured way.

As a team leader, your approach and example will determine whether people debate or argue. It is your duty to promote staying neutral, listening to others, paraphrasing each other's ideas, inviting and facing feedback, etc.

General guidelines for coping with conflict

- Accept that conflict is part of human nature and that it is therefore impossible that there will be no conflict where people work together.
- Remember that suppression of conflict often leads to further negative results – rather confront it openly and appropriately.
- Identify specific reasons for the conflict, such as poor communication, cultural differences of conflicting personalities.
- Show respect for your team member’s unique cultures, backgrounds and values.
- Listen actively to the other party’s ideas and viewpoint. Check your understanding of the facts by asking clarifying questions. Do not interrupt or blame.
- Focus on the problem, not the person.
- Keep your cool and remain in control at all times.
- Always aim to find a win-win solution for all parties involved, and to work actively on solving and managing the conflict.

Managing and responding to conflict

As the team leader, you have to facilitate conflict. This process has two distinct steps:

- Venting – This involves listening to people so that they feel heard and so that any built-up emotions are diffused. People are rarely ready to move on to solutions until their emotional blocks have been removed.
- Resolving the issue – Research shows that we usually choose one of five common responses to resolving conflict (the details are in the table on the next page).



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Approach: Confronting		
Typical behaviour	Aim	Likely outcomes
"I'm in charge – do it my way or else."	To get your own way.	You will achieve your aim, but others will feel humiliated and resentful.
Approach: Avoiding		
It's not my problem; I never take sides.	To avoid dealing with the issue.	Frustration. Problems are left unresolved.
Approach: Compromising		
"Let's agree to disagree so that we can get on with the job."	To reach an agreement quickly.	Having to live with an appropriate but ineffective solution.
Approach: Accommodating		
"I'll risk my position to avoid bad feelings between us."	Not to upset the status quo.	People take advantage of you.
Approach: Cooperation		
"How can we solve this problem together?"; "This is my viewpoint, what is your?"	To solve the problem together.	Arriving at effective solutions to problems to the mutual satisfaction of all parties.

- There is no single approach that can be regarded as the most effective for all conflict situations. The choice of approach depends largely on the context and specific characteristics of the dispute.
- When deciding on a strategy for dealing with a specific conflict, you should keep two factors in mind:
 - What is your goal? What do you hope to accomplish?
 - How important is the relationship to you?
- For example: Is this relationship long term or passing? Is the relationship pure business or also personal? Is the relationship more important than the matter under discussion? How important is it to maintain a friendly working relationship with those with who I am in conflict?

- A few examples:
 - When the matter is trivial (e.g. the choice of a theme for a social function), use the cooperative approach to avoid spoiling good work relationships.
 - When both parties involved have strong interests (e.g. negotiations for wages), compromising is the most appropriate choice, as a power struggle is avoided.
 - When a close and productive working relationship is very important, it is often better to give in on a point of difference and use the accommodating approach than to jeopardise an effective partnership.

Using the right conflict resolution technique will have little effect if all the surrounding factors aren't in place. Conditions required for conflict resolution include:

- Shared power
- Recognition of the interdependence of all parties
- Voluntary participation
- Adequate time
- Careful preparation
- Real gains

Key behaviour agreements required for conflict resolution include:

- Willingness to listen and to focus on the problem, rather than on the person
- Willingness to define the problem
- Willingness to allow some anger and hostility to surface during the discussion
- Willingness to commit to decisions
- Willingness to accept that one might be a part of the problem
- Willingness to try to change behaviour

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Conflict prevention techniques

Although conflict will always be present and can even be healthy, it makes sense to eliminate some sources of friction before they even begin. By managing conflict effectively, the team leader can gain the benefit of conflict without the cost. The following techniques minimise or deflect conflict:

- *Team building*

Training and coaching on team-building skills can reduce the amount of conflict. These skills include developing shared goals and team norms, clarifying expectations and setting clear objectives.

- *Diversity training*

Individuals increasingly work with people from different backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, etc. Diversity training enables the team members to understand the importance of differences among individuals and how to manage them effectively. Training topics include self-awareness of personal prejudices and stereotypes, valuing differences, understanding and reducing discrimination, etc.

- *Open communication*

By exchanging information freely and keeping people informed, conflict that arises from lack of information is reduced. Open communication includes regular meetings, efficient feedback, etc.

- *Conflict management training*

Team members can learn to manage conflict in case it arises. Useful skills include respecting the legitimacy of other viewpoints and feelings, listening actively, communicating assertively, etc.

- *Focusing on other people first*

Often when we disagree with someone, we rush to explain why our ideas are better. This can motivate the other person to defend him/herself. A technique for preventing such a conflict situation is anticipating the other person's objection and explaining how you take that into account: "I know you're concerned about x, so let me tell you how I think this can be overcome." To improve processes, consider how others might benefit from the change. Since many people dislike change, you can increase their willingness to listen to your idea if they feel doing so can benefit them.

Sources

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