

Communication Skills

Effective communication is one of the biggest factors in successful leadership. By communicating effectively, managers gain commitment from employees, develop rapport with peers and team members, and achieve goals. Managers can enhance their communication skills by committing to and practicing 5 key strategies:

1. Listening

Know when to stop talking and start listening, especially in three situations:

- *When emotions are high.* People feel acknowledged when others validate their feelings; ignoring them creates distance. Emotions can also interfere with clear thinking. Allowing employees to address emotions helps them move beyond them and get back to business.
- *In team situations.* Teams involve multiple personalities, complex dynamics, and competing agendas. By careful and attentive listening, managers can ensure all members are working toward the same goal, identify conflicts at an early stage, and foster healthy relationships.
- *When employees are sharing ideas.* When managers stop listening to ideas, employees stop giving them. Don't be cut off from your employees' creativity and expertise.

The fundamentals of active listening include: attend to what's being said instead of focusing on what you'll say next, allow others to finish speaking before taking a turn, and repeat back what you've heard to provide an opportunity for clarification.

2. Facilitating

This goes beyond listening to leading a conversation. It involves 3 continuous steps:

- Invite dialogue on a specific topic,
- Hear what is said and integrate it into the topic, and
- Say something to move the conversation forward.

Good facilitators garner the input of all in the group while guiding the group toward a desired outcome.

3. Questioning

Different types of questions yield different types of answers and information.

- Closed questions for yes/no answers: "Has the report been completed?"
- Open questions for input, information, or exploration: "How are you doing on the report?"
- Appropriate personal questions to create a sense of camaraderie: "How was your weekend?"

4. Using discretion

Adopt a policy of discretion with employees to develop the trust that is vital to productivity. Let employees know you are always available for a private conversation; this may allow you to help discuss a situation and develop strategies to handle it. (*Note: Information that references potential discrimination or criminal activity cannot be kept confidential and must be reported to HR.*)

5. Directing

The kinds of communication addressed above are successful in getting employees to work productively in a spirit of cooperation and in a more pleasant environment. However, directing has its place when you need to provide clear information or instructions, when the goal is efficiency, or in times of confusion. When giving direction:

- Know what's important to your audience and address that.
- Identify the desired outcome and repeat it more than once.
- In addition to the "what," include the "why" in an understandable way.
- Gain consensus by asking if the direction is clear and achievable.