



Effective Communication

Before we get into difficult conversations I want to give you some simple but powerful strategies for improving your communication in general. I recommend using these every day during your regular interactions, if you use them consistently they should cut down the situations that could build up to difficult conversations.

First

Use as many levels of communication as you can. Humans pick up a lot of meaning from the nonverbal cues that we see and hear when we interact. This is why you should be careful using email and text to convey important information, that loss of nonverbal information can have the other person hear a whole different meaning than what you intended. The important thing here is that they all line up, for example if you're praising your team's efforts don't be shaking your head or if you want to connect with someone on a personal level don't meet in a noisy place.

Second

Clearly share your intent for the communication. If you state your goal you increase the chances the receiver will hear it as you mean it. You might say something like 'the reason I'm calling you is to apologise for how the meeting went' or 'the purpose for this email is to confirm that you're coordinating the tradeshow'.

Third

Avoid over generalising, it's fairly common that when we care about something we state it more strongly but using phrases like 'you always' or 'you never' are going to create defensiveness in the other person. Also avoid exaggerating which is a form of generalising. This is when 10 minutes late becomes 20 or two missed meetings becomes three. Overstating things gives the other person a place to counter you with examples and then you're in an argument and not focused on the goal you want to achieve.

Fourth

Speak for yourself use something called 'I' statements. I statements are when you speak in the first person to talk about your experiences and your feelings. The goal is to convey the impact the other person's behaviour has on you. For example instead of saying 'it annoys everyone when you are late to meetings' say something like 'when you are late to meetings I feel frustrated because I have to rework the agenda on the fly' this will also help prevent you from speaking on behalf of which can make someone feel ganged up on.

Now let's switch to the **receiver's perspective**. There are also some good strategies to use when you're the receiver in the communication.

First

Be an active listener. Focus on what the other person is saying and show that you're listening. Use nonverbal signals such as nodding your head to show agreement, or leaning forward to show interest. Most importantly avoid the temptation to start building your counter argument in your head. The goal of active listening is to be sure you're really hearing what the other person is trying to convey.

Second

Ask questions when you're the receiver, your goal is to make sure you're hearing the message accurately. If something's not clear ask a question that will provide clarity.

Third

Confirm what you understand. One of my favourite techniques is called paraphrasing and share back to the person what you think they said. This does not mean that you agree, you're just making sure that you got the message correctly. For example you might say 'so what I'm hearing you say is my lateness causes extra work for you and that's frustrating'.

Finally

Share your perspective once the other person feels heard you can now share what you think and feel. Hopefully the other person who's now the receiver uses the same techniques of active listening and so on. Be as clear as possible, identify where you're in agreement and where you disagree. If the situation is complex take each piece separately. In the dialogue you'll go back and forth using the strategies for senders and receivers, during the conversation you'll both increase your clarity and understanding. Over time as you have more and more successful communications you'll also build trust. Using these strategies for everyday communication will greatly enhance your effectiveness as well as your relationships.

But difficult conversations are still going to happen and these strategies are not sufficient to get you through a difficult conversation. Difficult conversations are unique because the stakes are higher and our emotions are stronger. So let's turn our attention to how to successfully have difficult conversations.