

Communicating as a Manager

Overview

Seven tips on communicating effectively as a manager.

- Be a positive communicator
- Be a careful communicator
- Actively listen
- Meet regularly with each of your direct reports
- Give and ask for frequent feedback
- Be honest, direct, and prompt when delivering bad news
- Learn effective ways to handle conflict

Communication is at the heart of everything you do as a manager. Studies show that managers spend as much as 80 percent of their workday communicating. You spend your day talking, listening, presenting, and sharing information with people both inside and outside the organization. The better you are at sharing ideas and communicating with customers, clients, and the people you manage, the more you will understand people's needs and the more successful you will be in your work.

Here are seven ways to communicate effectively at work.

I. Be a positive communicator.

Research shows that employees whose managers communicate in positive ways are more productive and feel more positive about their work. Being a positive communicator means offering recognition, support, feedback, praise, and encouragement.

- *Set a positive tone.* Discourage complaining, gossip, and negativity among the employees you manage. Avoid engaging in it yourself. You need to lead by example.
- *Make personal connections with employees even when you are busy.* Personal connections don't have to take a lot of time. Sometimes all it takes is a simple question like, "How was your weekend?" or "How did that meeting go this morning?" Pick up the phone or send an e-mail. When you can, connect in person.
- *Be positive in the nonverbal ways that you communicate.* Be aware of the messages you send with body language, tone of voice, and eye contact.
- *Create an atmosphere of open communication.* Convey the message to employees that you are not too busy to be interrupted for concerns or unexpected issues that come up. Have hours that you are available in your office with the door open. Encourage people to stop by. If you're busy when they try, don't let them slip away. Make an appointment to see the person later, or call as soon as you break. Thank people for stopping in. In the case of people who habitually chew your ear off, from your team or from other departments, you'll need to politely set limits. "I just have a few minutes today. I'm on deadline, but I'd love to hear what's on your mind."

- *Encourage people to be open and candid.* Show employees that you are serious about creating and sustaining an open atmosphere by being open in your interactions with them. For example, if it's not confidential, tell them what news you've heard from your boss or at management meetings.

2. Be a careful communicator.

- *Always tell the truth.* Otherwise, you undermine your credibility and reputation.
- *If you don't know the answer to a question, say so.* Then offer to find the answer if appropriate. You might respond to an employee's question about future pay raises like this: "I'm aware that senior management has been discussing compensation, and when there's something announced, I'll be sure to tell you."
- *Speak simply and clearly, and avoid jargon.* Everyone will be less likely to misinterpret what you said or intended to say.
- *Explain your decisions as much as possible.* Giving reasons for your decisions demonstrates respect for your employees and minimizes misunderstandings, misperceptions, hurt feelings, and the spread of rumors. Say you decide to cancel a project that group members have been working on. People will want to hear why. What were the main considerations that went into the decision and who was involved in making it? Explain as much as you can.
- *Never communicate when you are angry or feeling highly emotional.* In highly charged situations, take the time to gather your thoughts. You might compose a draft e-mail or draft notes for a future conversation, then save it and come back to it the next day when you are feeling less emotional. Never send an e-mail when you are feeling emotional. It is the wrong medium for clearing up confusion or resolving a conflict.
- *Don't make promises you can't keep.* If you've offered to take an action, for example, but later find it's not possible to follow through, let the people who are affected know about the change right away.
- *Apologize.* If you say something you later wish you hadn't, follow up with a personal response and an apology. Maybe you spoke harshly to an employee, overreacted at a meeting, or criticized someone too harshly. An apology is in order. It's best to offer it in private and in person. "I apologize for what I said yesterday."
- *Keep people informed.* Give updates in regularly scheduled meetings about work, projects, and organizational changes. Generally, people like to be told about the big-picture issues. For many employees, it's important to understand how they fit in to the functioning of the organization.
- *Deliver sensitive information tactfully and carefully.* If you have personal or confidential information to share with an employee, arrange a time to talk when you can both devote the time and attention needed. Respect employees' privacy

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as well. For example, never leave personnel documents visible on your desk where they might be seen by employees.

- *Respond to messages and requests from employees promptly whenever possible.* If you don't have time to respond today, send back a quick message saying when you will have time to respond.
- *Keep in mind that people's talents, skills, and personalities are different.* Some people are intimidated by a very direct style. Some people aren't comfortable responding on the spot to their manager; they need to go away and think things over before responding. Some people need lots of detailed data and information, while others want to understand issues from a big-picture perspective or only want to talk about the human impact. Observe people's interactions and individual differences in communication styles and try to respect these as much as possible. Make it a priority to fully understand and respect the unique job challenges of each employee who reports to you.
- *Know what information to share -- and not share -- with employees.* It may be fine, for example, to share certain information you have about an organizational change, but not everything you know. If you are unsure, ask your manager to clarify what information is OK and not OK to share.
- *Keep it short.* Don't expect that everyone you need to reach has time to read or listen to all the details. Communicate the essentials as clearly and succinctly as possible.
- *Use e-mail appropriately.* Treat e-mail like you would treat a letter written on company letterhead. "A business communication is business, period," writes Chris McClean in an article on www.pertinent.com. "A certain degree of formality is required." Always maintain rules of politeness. Use a greeting and closing, such as "Hello Jan," and "Thank you," at the end of your e-mail. Use correct grammar and the spell-check function. Use paragraph breaks for better organization and to make your message or memo easier to read. Re-read what you've written at least once before sending it. Remind employees of these important rules.
- *Be careful to include the people -- and only those people -- who should be included in your communications.* If you forget to include someone in a communication who should have been copied or included, send a follow-up memo and apologize for the oversight. Do the same if you forget to invite someone to a meeting who should have been on the meeting list. This will help avoid hurt feelings and misunderstandings. Be careful about copying or sending a message to too many people. You run the risk of slowing down or complicating a decision -- or overpublicizing a problem -- the more people you involve in a conversation or discussion.

3. Actively listen.

Active listening is the foundation of effective communication. It means letting the other person talk and making the effort to fully understand what he or she is saying -- before you respond. It means thoughtfully paying attention and not letting your mind wander. When you actively listen, you *pay attention* to listening. You don't interrupt, check your e-mail, or take calls.

- *Practice active listening and make it a habit.* When you are having an interaction with someone at work, face the person, stop what you are doing, make eye contact, and listen. If your mind starts to wander or you feel yourself about to multitask, tell yourself these things can wait. You are busy listening.
- *Paraphrase what the other person said using your own words to be sure you understood.* It's a way to clarify and confirm information. You might say, "So what I heard you say is that the customer wants a new plan from us by Monday."
- *Ask people what they think.* You can say, "How do you see it?" or "What do you think?"
- *Avoid judging the other person's appearance and language skills.*

4. Meet regularly with each of your direct reports.

Take the time to meet regularly one on one to review workloads and assignments, expectations, and concerns. All employees need time with their manager, but many don't get enough. A study published in the journal *Personnel Today* showed that 20 percent of employees surveyed met with their manager only once a month; an additional 15 percent rarely or never had a meeting with their manager. While monthly meetings are much better than none at all, regularly scheduled time with employees is the best way to ensure that people understand the work and have the support and comfort level they need with you to be productive.

- *Take the time to explain and review goals.* Data from a recent Watson Wyatt study showed that a majority of U.S. employees are unclear about the link between their jobs and their company's objectives. Yet research also consistently shows that when employees feel connected to the business and understand how their actions can support it, there is less employee turnover and greater productivity. Reviewing goals is a productive way to spend your time as a manager. Tie the work to organizational objectives so that employees understand not only their work, but the business as well.
- *Listen and ask questions at your meetings with employees.* Do employees know what is expected of them on a given project or assignment? Have you gone over the project timeline together? Does the employee have the tools he or she needs to do the work?

- *Be sure employees know where they can go for coaching, answers, and information.* Encourage people to sign up for training and other opportunities to grow in their jobs. Continually stress the importance of learning new things, especially in the area of advancing technology.

5. Give and ask for frequent feedback.

Giving feedback to employees is a challenge for even the most experienced managers. Asking for feedback from employees and your own manager is also challenging. But immediate and specific feedback is what we all need to be productive and improve in our work. If done well, it can be a positive experience all around. Here are a few suggestions:

- *Provide opportunities for employees to share their ideas and concerns* at both individual and group meetings.
- *Ask for feedback from employees.* Show employees that you respect and want to hear what they have to say, even if you don't always agree with them. In individual or small-group meetings, ask "Is there anything I can do to make this project easier?"
- *Follow through both in answering questions and responding to feedback.* It shows employees that you can be counted on and that you care.

6. Be honest, direct, and prompt when delivering bad news.

- *Don't put off delivering difficult or bad news.* Delay can give time for tensions to grow and rumors to spread.
- *Choose the right time and an appropriate place to deliver difficult news.* Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. You don't want to be called away in the middle of a difficult conversation.
- *Be prepared.* Have all of the facts and information you need on hand. Try to anticipate the questions people might ask and be ready with answers. Write down what you plan to say and rehearse it. This might help if you feel very nervous about having to give difficult news.
- *Deliver the news.* Tell employees what is happening and be clear on the facts. For example, "An organizational change is going into effect today. It won't affect your jobs, but it will affect how we do our work."
- *Give people plenty of time to voice their concerns.* Listen carefully. Then help them to begin to focus on the future.
- *After giving the group enough time to absorb the news, talk about actions you will take* as a group moving forward. This puts the focus on tomorrow.
- *Follow these same guidelines when delivering bad news to your manager.* For example, if there has been a service breakdown or a problem with a client that your

manager should know about, be prompt, prepared, and direct when having the conversation. Here is one way to begin the conversation: “I have some information to share with you about a problem we had this morning that led to a serious breakdown in customer service.” Summarize briefly what happened. Then explain what actions you have taken and are taking to deal with the problem.

7. Learn effective ways to handle conflict.

Conflict is normal in all work settings and even among the most productive employees. Here is some basic advice on managing conflict:

- *Take conflict seriously.* Failure to deal with conflict among employees or between an employee and a manager can lead to absenteeism, inefficient work, and even workplace violence. When there is a conflict, face it directly and promptly.
- *Help employees understand that resolving conflict requires give and take from everyone.* You might say something like this: “All groups of people have conflicts. And in this group, when we have a conflict, we talk about it, everybody gets listened to, and then we agree on a plan to move ahead.”
- *If you need support in resolving a conflict, seek help from your manager, HR, or the program that provided this publication.* Talking it through with a professional can be very helpful.

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