Communicating with Employees

Good communication skills are essential to your success as a manager. Studies show that managers spend as much as 80 percent of their workday communicating. The better you are at communicating with customers, clients, and employees, the more successful you will be in your work. Here are quick tips to keep in mind:

• Set a positive tone. Offer plenty of recognition, support, and encouragement. Discourage complaining, gossip, and negative talk at work. Avoid engaging in these things 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 training go this morning?”

• Praise good work as often as you can. Remember to say “thank you” and “nice job.” Don’t be sparing in your thanks and your praise. There’s no risk of spoiling people. For most employees, the better they feel about their abilities and their work, the better work they’ll do.

• Communicate expectations and deadlines clearly, often, and in a positive manner. For example, you might say, “Bob, I really look forward to getting that report from you on Friday -- I’m sure it’ll be well done.”

• Keep an open mind when discussing a problem. Refrain from judging until you’ve heard all that the employee has to say.

• Pay attention and listen when you are having a conversation with an employee. Don’t interrupt, check your e-mail, or take calls.

• Listen and ask questions when meeting with employees. Show employees that you respect and want to hear what they have to say, even if you don’t always agree with them. Ask them questions like, “How do you see it?” or “What do you think?” Show that you want their feedback.

• Always tell the truth. One falsehood can destroy a manager’s credibility. If a question catches you off guard, say “I’ll check and get back to you on that.”

• Be aware of your nonverbal communication. The way you say something is often more important than what you say. Smile. Strive for a friendly tone of voice and even when reprimanding someone, keep your tone respectful and professional.
• **Explain your decisions as much as possible.** Giving reasons shows respect and minimizes misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and the spread of rumors. If you are about to introduce a schedule change, you can count on the fact that employees will want to know 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 draft notes for a future conversation, then save it and come back to it the next day when you are feeling less emotional.

• **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 sharply criticized someone. An apology is in order. It’s best to offer it in private and in person. And when you make an apology, be direct about it. Say, “I apologize for what I said yesterday,” not, “I’m sorry if you were offended.”

• **If you have questions or concerns about communicating at work, contact your human resources (HR) representative or the program that provided this article.** Your HR representative or the program that provided this article may be able to give you advice about what to do and what to say in situations like the following:
  - when you need help delivering sensitive news to an employee
  - when you feel that you’re not “getting through” to an employee, to your group as a whole, or to others
  - when a communication problem is affecting employees or customers
  - when a communication problem is affecting performance and may require disciplinary measures

• **Encourage employees to contact the program as well.** Communication problems are often the result of personal or work-related issues. Whatever the issue, the program that provided this article may be able to help.

Improved communication leads to greater teamwork, attendance, and productivity. We are here to help you achieve those goals.

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