

“The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

George Bernard Shaw

A common breakdown when communicating during a conflict is the result of trying to read people's minds or expecting them to read yours. Mind reading is often incorrect, and often harms the relationship. During any communication when the stakes are high, the goal is to express your ideas and needs in a way that will make others want to respond nicely. This is the essence of civil, tolerant communication.

Three Communication Approaches

There are three fundamental communication approaches: passive, assertive and aggressive. Passive communicators **avoid** expressing their opinions or feelings, and often do not protect their rights or needs. Aggressive communicators express their feelings and opinions in **a way that violates**, and often disrespect the rights of others. Assertive communicators **respect the boundaries** of oneself and others, and communicate through cooperation.

Sometimes, however, we are unaware of how others perceive us. You may think you're being appropriately assertive, but an emotionally unaware or stressed coworker may perceive you to be aggressive. Add to the mix our personal agendas, and it's easy to see how communication breakdowns can breed conflict.

Assertive Communication and EQ

Assertiveness is the ability to express your opinions, feelings, attitudes and rights with mindfulness. Assertive communication relies on the SMARTER skill of self-efficacy, a belief that if you behave in a certain way, something predictable will occur.

Assertive communication increases with emotional self-awareness and self-management. Practice these emotional intelligent work-outs to communicate more assertively and civilly with others.

1. Think and talk about yourself POSITIVELY. Eliminate qualifying statements to your opinions or requests (e.g., “you’ll probably think this is crazy, but...”, “...I guess”, “but that’s just my opinion”).
2. Reduce tag questions (e.g., “does that make sense?”, “is that okay?”).
3. Take responsibility for yourself. Eliminate “should”, “ought to”, and “have to”.
4. Practice using the phrase “I choose to”.
5. Giving and getting information. When you are asked a yes/no question respond with a yes/no answer. Give as much information as you feel comfortable. Respond without a lengthy explanation.
6. Use “I” statements. The use of “you” statements distance you from your feelings. When emotionally hi jacked, people may interpret statements that begin with “you” as blaming and often become defensive in response. Instead, use statements that begin with “I feel ____”. Practice “I feel...” statements rather than using “I think...” statements. Recognize that no one can tell you how to feel. There are no right or wrong feelings, feelings just are.
7. Persistence. Use the broken record technique: repetition of a simple statement of fact (e.g., “I am not available at 2:00, our original time is at 1:00 is better for me”).

SMARTER Leadership and Conflict

Leaders can contribute to conflict by communicating ambiguously, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Most leaders want to avoid conflict, but sometimes leaders can seem to “talk out of both sides of their mouths” and give mixed messages. In optimal circumstances, issues may be resolved, but such communication fosters an organizational climate that

discourages commitment (at best) and promotes conflicts (at worst).

Leaders must *ask the questions behind the questions* to foster tolerant communications. Many leaders are *sitting too close to the blackboard* to see their communication errors. A [professional coach or consultant](#) can spot communication barriers and help correct approaches that contribute to conflict.

Organizational Sources of Conflict

Several conditions make a workplace fertile ground for conflict:

1. If an organization has a **rigid hierarchical structure**, with an authoritarian leadership culture, expect conflict avoidance and a robust rumor mill. In this type of environment, open communications are discouraged.
2. A **poorly instituted reward/promotional system**, where unfair favoritism is perceived.
3. When leaders are forced to compete for **limited resources**, their agendas can prevent them from really listening to others. Leaders become more concerned with their professional or business gains and forget about the organization's or team's overall well-being.
4. **Change itself** can destabilize relations, as people move out of their comfort zones. Rapidly changing environments create a ripe atmosphere for stress, anxiety and conflict – [or VUCA times](#).

Keys to Managing Conflict

When conflict occurs, leaders must address it as soon as possible to prevent it from escalating into a chronic or pervasive problem.

- [Create rules of engagement](#). Establish procedures and rules for addressing conflict fairly and with civility.

- [Demonstrate the importance of caring](#). Nothing can be resolved in an atmosphere of emotional tension.
- [Depersonalize the issues](#). Focus on behaviors and problems, not on personalities.
- [Don't triangulate or](#) bring in political allies.
- [Know when to let it go](#).
- [Know when to bring in a professional mediator, coach or trainer](#).

Nine Tips for Difficult Conversations

1. Listen without saying a word 70 percent of the time. Confirm you understand what the other person is saying 20 percent of the time, both verbally and nonverbally. In the remaining time, ask clarifying questions that advance the conversation's meaning.
2. Become a people reader. Pay attention to others' facial expressions.
3. Focus not only on what people are saying, but also on what they are *not* saying.
4. Frequently confirm what people are thinking, feeling and believing. Don't assume you know what they mean.
5. When people are trying to make their points, practice the art of saying "tell me more."
6. Go into difficult conversations prepared and mindful. Take several minutes to quiet the brain- deep breathe and get centered. Quieting the limbic brain provides space to visualize an assertive, positive and respectful conversation.
7. You get what you want by first giving others what they need.
8. At the end of every important conversation, review the commitments.
9. Appreciate the other person for the conversation.

SMARTER solutions combine the passion of the heart with the intellect of the brain and the reciprocity of relationships. We'd love to connect and chat about how to use intelligence of emotions and power of social relationships to thrive, and not just survive, in any workplace or career.

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