

# Guidelines for Interpersonal Communication

## *Effective Techniques to Improve Interactions*

### 1. **Prepare by asking yourself:**

- ◆ Why am I choosing to do, or say, this?
- ◆ Am I confusing my personal feelings with my objectivity?
- ◆ Would I like to be treated this way?
- ◆ Would I want everyone to be treated this way?
- ◆ If this were to become public, would I be comfortable with my actions?

### 2. **Listen effectively:**

- Avoid jumping to conclusions, making premature judgments, agreements, comparisons, or criticisms.
- Seek the reasons behind the comments or statements of those with whom you are speaking. Ask, "Why?"
- Remember you are hearing only one side of a story. Ask for permission if you wish to speak with others.
- Emphasize facts. Gather objective information. Do not try to solve a problem until facts on all sides are available.
- Early on, it is better to understand the point of view of other people than it is to agree or disagree with it.
- Be consistent.

### 3. **Ask yourself: "What kind of data would make me change my mind?"**

- Ask for help from knowledgeable people. See back panel for a list of resources.
- Familiarize yourself with the policies and procedures that apply.

### 4. **Be respectful.**

- Don't embarrass others, *especially* in public.
- Don't misdirect your anger.

### 5. **Act thoughtfully and carefully — don't react.**

- You usually do not have to agree to any course of action on the spot. It may be wiser, and safer, to wait.
- Keep a record of the conversation.
- **Behave professionally**, no matter what the other person says or how you feel. Your own behavior can change the focus of the discussion and decision making from the issue at hand.

[1] In general, people want to feel that they have been treated fairly and feel that they have been understood and respected, regardless of what is being communicated. The ability to listen respectfully can be effective in many emotionally charged situations, such as listening to concerns about sexual harassment, discrimination, authorship order, or in telling someone to leave a job.

You should try to figure out how the other person will perceive the significance of what is being said in light of their circumstances. For example, a person who has just taken on a mortgage could view being told to leave as a devastating blow, while another person might view it as liberation from a stifling job. This knowledge may alter how, or what, you are going to do or say. This does not mean that you will necessarily change the direction you are going, but it can help you steer around problems getting there.

How can you do this? You can get there by looking beyond the *position* you (or the other person) are taking as the way to solve the problem, to the *interests* that underlie the stated position. That is, after asking, "What do you want?" ask, "Why do you want this?" If you are not sure why someone has taken a particular position, don't guess - ask. Determine and gather the factual or objective information that will help you and the other person understand the situation better. A *position* can change once the facts are brought into the open and understood. There may be multiple ways to resolve a matter once you know what is concerning the other person. Some worries can be minimized once you know what they are. You may be able to craft a solution that will enable you to be more effective and, at the same time, account for the needs of another, thus lessening the severity of the news.

To be most effective, initially you will need to gather the appropriate information in an impartial, non-judgmental manner. You do not want to be, or appear to be, an advocate or adversary. It may be useful to affirm the feelings that you hear-but say explicitly that you must stay neutral on the facts. People stop talking if they perceive disapproval. At this stage, it is usually not wise that you agree or disagree with what is being said. Instead, gather information to understand what is driving (worrying) the person with whom you are communicating and let them know you understand how they might be feeling. If you are open-minded about what you hear, problems that might otherwise escalate may be seen in better perspective.

In practice, how can you have this kind of conversation without appearing to be on the side of, or against, the person with whom you are speaking? You can validate a person's feelings without agreeing or disagreeing with the content of their concerns by:

### **Basic Acknowledgement:**

Nodding your head.

Saying, "I see."

Eye contact, as appropriate within the person's cultural norms.

### **Asking Questions:**

*Closed-ended questions* will give you a yes or no answer. They are useful to gather some kinds of information, but, generally, they will not help people look at their underlying interests in a way that will help them assess their situation.

Are you all right?

Do you understand what has been written?

Did you follow the directions?

*Direct questions* ask for specific information so you can ascertain the perceptions or understanding the person has of the situation being discussed.

What brings you here today?

Can you tell me what happened?

When did this happen?

Did anyone else see or hear this?

How long has this been going on?

What else might be worth knowing?

Who else knows about this?

*Open-ended questions* encourage the other person to give more extensive information that may help alter their or your position.

How did that make you, and others, feel?  
What are you worried about?  
Why does that bother you?  
Why do you think this is not the right thing to do?  
How important is that?  
What do you see as the problem?  
What would your "vision" of an outcome look like, given the constraints?  
What would you gain by...?  
Is there a down side to doing...?  
What would you do if...?  
How do you think this will this impact your job/future/life?

*Open-ended questions* can also help a person move beyond despair or anger and into a more active mode of problem solving for the future.

Have you thought about what you might do?  
What would you feel comfortable doing?  
What would you like to see happen?  
What prevents you from...?  
What's the worst thing you can imagine happening if...?  
How would you accomplish that?

### **Listening Reflectively:**

To affirm that what you have heard is what a person meant you will need to repeat back key words or phrases or put in your own words what you have heard, and then check for misunderstandings by asking if what you believe you have heard is correct.

It appears that..... Is that the case?  
It sounds like..... Right?  
So, your view is..... Yes?  
If I heard you correctly..... Is that right?  
What you seem to be saying is..... Did I understand correctly?  
The thing you want the most is..... Is that true?  
Are you saying..... ?  
You felt or you feel..... Yes?  
It seems that you think..... Right?

### **Using Silence:**

May encourage the person to absorb the information and to provide you with more information.

### **What to avoid:**

Jumping to conclusions.  
Rushing to judgments.  
Speaking those judgments.  
Giving unwanted advice.  
Moving prematurely to problem solving.  
Changing the subject.  
Talking about your self.  
Talking about other similar cases.

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The suggestions above are some possibilities you may want to choose depending on the situation. They are not the only possibilities. You may also find that asking and answering the questions for yourself can be enormously valuable for averting problems down the road. With the information you gather, you can determine if your initial position, or the other person's, can be altered to be kinder, fairer, easier to accept, more in line with usual practice, based on reality, within the law, etc. You can contact the Ombuds Office for specific suggestions for a particular situation at any time.

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