

## Communicating Constructively



### In a Nutshell

Constructive communication preserves a positive relationship between communicators while addressing problems. Poor approaches to communication, on the other hand, can exacerbate problems.

When coaching or counseling an employee who has a negative attitude, a personality conflict with a coworker or hasn't performed up to expectations, the principles of constructive communication are particularly important. On these occasions, the risk of putting the employee on the defensive is very high. In response, many managers decide not to bother worrying about feelings, and just take a "hard-nosed" approach. Many other managers go to the other extreme and avoid confronting problems entirely. A better approach to these situations is addressing the issue while using the attributes of constructive communication.

Constructive communication makes managers more effective at coaching and counseling by **reducing defensiveness**. Subordinates often react defensively if they feel they are being punished or threatened by the communication. When subordinates react defensively, they devote attention to identifying counterarguments rather than listening. Therefore, **communication is more productive** when it is done constructively.

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### "That's Ridiculous"

I recently attended a committee meeting where counterproductive dialogue between well-meaning participants risked the survival of the group. Failure to use constructive communication left three committee members feeling frustrated and, perhaps, unappreciated.

During the committee meeting, one of the members raised concerns about an item he saw in the minutes of the previous meeting. When he raised those concerns it took the discussion off the topic on the agenda. In a perfect world, the committee chair would have tactfully told him that we would discuss the concern later, at an appropriate time. However, the committee chair chose to address the issue and did so in a counterproductive manner. The chair, partly because he didn't listen well enough, thought his decision making was being challenged. He became frustrated, defensive and agitated, and he responded to the committee member in a manner that created more frustration. He interrupted the committee member and told him he had nothing to

worry about. But, because the chair didn't listen to the issue carefully enough, he didn't really understand the worry being communicated. Later in the meeting, the chair repeated the pattern with another committee member who voiced a concern that was off topic. When the meeting adjourned, all three parties were frustrated.

In retrospect, if the chair was not going to ask the committee members to stick to the agenda, then he needed to listen carefully to the issues being raised and [reflect](#) back what was being said. He could have [probed](#) as to why the issue was being raised. The chair should have shown respect for each committee member's concerns even though he didn't agree with them. It usually doesn't help to tell someone who is significantly worried that they have nothing to worry about. What's more helpful is to listen to their concerns and tactfully help them see that the problem isn't as bad as they originally thought. Directly telling someone he or she has nothing to worry about can communicate condescension or apathy, particularly when not taking the time to really listen. When we express concerns, we don't want to hear "that's ridiculous" in response. Following the principles of constructive communication is more supportive and causes less conflict.

## The Eight Attributes of Constructive Communication

Constructive communication is particularly helpful when coaching or counseling a member of your staff. A poorly handled discussion of a staff member's performance can easily lead to defensiveness and even outright rejection of any suggestions for improvement.

**Problem oriented, not person oriented.** Problem-oriented communication focuses on a problem that can be solved rather than the person who is responsible for the problem. An example of problem-oriented communication is if a committee chair were to tell a committee member, "That topic is not on today's agenda." On the other hand, an example of person-oriented communication would be, "You're off topic." Person-oriented communication puts the listener on the defensive and focuses the attention on blame rather than on avoiding or solving future problems.

**Congruent, not incongruent.** Congruent communication conveys what the speaker is thinking and feeling. There are definitely situations where discretion is a more appropriate choice than full disclosure of what we think and feel. However, in most communication situations, we communicate more effectively when we're candid. If we aren't honest, listeners won't trust what we say. A common example of incongruent communication is saying that "it's no big deal" or "I don't mind" when you are in fact discussing an important issue. We're constructive when we use congruent communication because we're giving the other party the truth rather than misleading them.

**Descriptive, not evaluative.** Evaluative communication expresses judgment of the listener, or his or her actions. To be a constructive communicator, we should objectively describe problems rather than speak in an evaluative manner. An example of a blatantly evaluative statement would be, "Your last shipment was screwed up." Evaluative communication puts the listener on the defensive. It's more descriptive and therefore more constructive to say, "Your last shipment left out an important piece."

**Validating, not invalidating.** Validating communication helps people feel understood, valued, and accepted. In contrast, invalidating communication treats people as if they are ignored, worthless, or alienated. Invalidating communication is superiority-oriented, rigid, impervious and/or indifferent.

Consider this example: A marketing manager must correct one of her staff members for releasing a sales collateral package to the salesforce without a PowerPoint presentation that should have been included. When the marketing manager raises the issue with the staff member, he tells her, "I just thought it would be better to send the materials we did have right away to give the sales reps more time to become familiar with them than to wait on the PowerPoint presentation to be finished. I sent them an e-mail explaining that." The following responses by the marketing manager are examples of invalidating communication:

- "Take my word for it, sending incomplete packages causes more problems than it solves," is an example of superiority-oriented communication.
- "We have never sent them incomplete packages," is an example of rigidity.
- "Well, I guess you thought wrong," is an example of imperviousness.
- "And burn new CDs when we get the PowerPoint--don't e-mail it to them," is an example of indifference, because it ignores the staff member's comment altogether.

Validating communication avoids treating the listener like a lesser person or being inflexible, impervious or indifferent. Validating communication shows respect for the other party's thoughts and feelings, even when there's disagreement. One of the most effective ways of doing that is by finding a point of agreement. For instance, the marketing manager could have said, "I agree that getting sales collateral out in a timely fashion is a high priority. But, sending incomplete packages creates more hassles than delivery delays. Two reps called me today complaining that they didn't get the PowerPoint. Please call the others to let them know that the PowerPoint isn't ready yet."

**Specific, not global.** There are two key drawbacks to global statements of problems; they're often too large to be resolved and they tend to oversimplify and misrepresent problems. For instance, if the manager were to say to the staff member, "You're confusing the sales reps," the comment is too general to be accurate and helpful. First, even if sending the package without the PowerPoint created confusion, some of the sales reps probably understood the omission. So, that global statement is wrong, and that kind of inaccuracy adds fuel to the defensiveness. (The staff member thinks, "Only the idiots who don't read their e-mail are confused.") Second, it doesn't tell the staff member what he should do to improve. Maybe he can figure it out, but a more specific statement would explain what the coach expects in the future. A more specific statement would be, "Sending incomplete packages creates more hassles than delivery delays, so let's avoid sending incomplete packages."

**Conjunctive, not disjunctive.** Disjunctive communication takes at least three forms; not letting the other party speak, long pauses, and switching topics. Disjunctive communication can result in the other party thinking that their input is not being considered. Having a discussion that bounces around from one topic to another without bringing closure to any topic is not constructive.

**Owned, not disowned.** When we "own" our communication, we take responsibility for our statements and acknowledge that we are the source of the ideas conveyed and not someone else. We "disown" communication when we search for third parties to attribute our comments to. For instance, if the manager would have said, "The sales reps asked me to ask you not to send them incomplete packages," she would have disowned the communication. We have more respect for a person who will be accountable for the requests they make.

**Listening, not one-way message delivery.** As June's *LeaderLetter* explains, effective listening is actively absorbing the information given to you by a speaker, showing that you are listening and interested, and providing feedback to the speaker so that he or she knows the message was received. Effective listening is often taken for granted, but it's a valuable managerial tool.

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### Practicing This Management Skill

Since this topic is so similar to June's, [listening effectively](#), the steps for practicing communicating constructively are very similar. To practice communicating constructively, plan to use the attribute of constructive communication that you think you need to improve the most (e.g., descriptive, not evaluative). Then, after you have a conversation, evaluate how effective you were at applying the attributes of constructive communication. Identify what went well and where the opportunities for improvement are. Think about what the challenges to communicating constructively were and how you can deal with those challenges more effectively next time.

Making a tape recording of a conversation can help you evaluate your performance. With a tape of a conversation, you can examine each attribute of constructive communication in detail, without relying on your memory.

### In Summary, ...

Failure to use the principles of constructive communication can cause defensiveness, insult another party and cause unnecessary conflict. Communication that is ...

- Problem oriented, not person oriented
- Congruent, not incongruent
- Descriptive, not evaluative
- Validating, not invalidating
- Specific, not global

- Conjunctive, not disjunctive
- Owned, not disowned, and
- Listening, not one-way message delivery

... is more likely to support problem solving and less likely to create more problems between parties.

### Source

Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills*, (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

### About the Photo

Chicago White Sox Manager Ozzie Guillen, left, argues with second base umpire Hunter Wendelstedt after he was ejected for arguing the call after Carlos Lee was caught stealing at second base against the Cleveland Indians during the first inning Monday, Aug. 9, 2004, in Chicago. (AP Photo/Brian Kersey: e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*; news.yahoo.com)

### About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

*LeaderLetter* is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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### E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **I learn a lot from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

### A Good, Clean Joke

The strong young man at the construction site was bragging that he could outdo anyone in a feat of strength. He made a special case of making fun of one of the older workmen. After several minutes, the older worker had had enough.

"Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?" he said. "I will bet a week's wages that I can haul something in a wheelbarrow over to that building that you won't be able to wheel back."

"You're on, old man," the young guy replied.

The old man reached out and grabbed the wheelbarrow by the handles. Then he turned to the young man and said, "All right. Get in."

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