

## 12 Tips For Smoother Conversations

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Recently, I heard someone say, "Communication is easy." I disagree. Talking is easy; communication, which means an exchange or communion with another, requires greater care and skill. An exchange that is a communion demands that we listen and speak skillfully, not just talk mindlessly. And interacting with fearful, angry or frustrated people can be even more difficult, because we're less skillful when caught up in such emotions. Yet don't despair or resign yourself to a lifetime of miscommunication at work or home! Good communicators can be honed as well as born. Here are a few tips to get you started.

1. Don't take another person's reaction or anger personally, even if they lash out at you in what seems a personal manner. Another person's mood or response is more likely about fear or frustration than it is about you as an individual. Take a deep breath and count to ten, and see it as a way of letting the other person vent before he is able to communicate what's really on his mind.
2. You don't have to have all the answers. It's OK to say, "You know, I don't know." If you want to find out, say so, then follow up to share your findings. Or you might decide to problem-solve together to find the answer.
3. Respond (facts and feelings); don't react (feelings), e.g. "Tell me more about your concern" or "I understand your frustration" instead of "Hey, I'm just doing my job" or "It's not my job" (which is sure to cause more irritation). Share responsibility for any communication in which you're a participant, and realize that sometimes, maybe often, your own personal reactions might be causing your frustrations about communicating with others.
4. Understand that people want to feel heard more than they care about whether you agree with them. It's strange how many people complain about others not hearing them, yet they don't listen to others either! You can show that you're listening by giving someone your complete (or as near complete as you can muster) attention and by saying things like:
  - "Tell me more about your concern." "What is it about XYZ that concerns you?" "I'm interested in what you've just said. Can you share a little bit about what lead you to that belief?"
  - "What would have to happen for you to be more comfortable with XYZ?"
5. Remember that what someone says and what we hear can often be amazingly different! Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments and beliefs can really distort what we hear. Repeat back or summarize to ensure understanding. Restate what you think you heard and ask, "Have I understood you correctly?" If you find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so, and ask for more information: "I may not be understanding you correctly, and I find myself taking what you said a bit personally. What I thought you just said—'XYZ'; is that what you meant?"
6. Acknowledge inconvenience or frustration and offer a timeline, particularly if you need someone else's cooperation or your activities will affect them. For example, if you'll be updating someone's desktop computer system and need access to her office, you might say, "I know it's frustrating to have someone in your space at a time that might not be convenient for you, and I appreciate your cooperation. It'll help us to keep your system working well. We expect to be in your office at about three o'clock, and out by five."

7. Don't offer advice unless asked. This can be tough, particularly if we have experience that we think might benefit another person. Use respectful expressions such as "One potential option is..." or "One thing that helped me in a similar situation was X. I'd be happy to share more about my experience if you think it'd be helpful to you" instead of "We want you to do X, Y, Z..." or "You should do X."
8. Look for common ground instead of focusing solely on differences. What might you both be interested in (e.g. making the experience as non-disruptive as possible)? One way to begin discovering commonality is to share your underlying intention, for example, "My intention in sharing this is to help you be really successful on this project."
9. Remember that change is stressful for most people, particularly if your activities affect them in a way that they aren't scheduling or controlling. Our routines can be very comforting in the midst of what appears to be a chaotic world. So if you're in someone's space or need them to do something on your timeline, provide as much information as you can about what you'll need from the person and when. If you can, tell him how what you're doing will benefit him.
10. Work to keep a positive mental focus. One of the choices we always have is how we see or experience any given circumstance. Many people who are considered skillful and successful, including professional athletes and cultural leaders, work to maintain a positive mindset. Ask yourself, "What's great about this?" or "What can I learn from this?" to help maintain a positive state. Don't forget to adopt a variety of stress reduction practices that work best for you.
11. Understand that most people, including you, have a unique, often self-serving, agenda. This isn't necessarily bad, as it helps us achieve and protect ourselves. Just don't assume that someone will know or share your agenda, so talking about what's most important to you and asking what's most important to others, specifically, can help build a solid foundation for conversation.
12. Improve your listening skill. Most people think they listen well, but the truth is that most people don't listen at all, they just speak and then think about what they're going to say next. Good listening often means asking good questions and clearing your mind of distractions, including what you're going to say next, who you're meeting with next or what's going on outside. When someone makes prickly comments or complaints, there's often a concern or fear lurking deeper. Like a detective, ask questions that get to the bottom of someone's real concern or agenda. Only then can you have a truly rich, beneficial conversation.

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