

Career Management Digest

Building Effective Communication Skills

Effective communication is critical to success in all aspects our lives. Learn how to effectively communicate and you'll be well on your way. Learning to effectively communicate, and using those skills every day, in every situation and you can become a master communicator. Practice these skills every day; effective communication has to become almost part of your DNA—as natural as breathing.

Effective Communication: It's More Than Words

Effective communicators utilize more than just words; it's body language, gestures, tone of voice, what you say and how you say it.

Body Language:

The silent language your body speaks tells volumes about you, and the more you know about this language and how to "speak" it, the more successful you will be. Many communication experts consider body language more important than the spoken word. Manage the impression others have of you by managing the messages your body sends.

There are four key elements that comprise your body language: Eye contact, posture, gestures and facial expressions. Let's look at each of them:

Eye Contact: People trust people who look them in the eye. Normal eye contact is about four to eight seconds. If a person you're speaking to seems uncomfortable, it might be due to a cultural difference. Be sensitive to the person you are speaking with and give the amount of eye contact that seems comfortable. Giving good eye contact is critical--it tells others that you are interested in them and in what they have to say.

Posture: A lot can be observed about your posture— from across the room or from across the street. Do you slouch? Others see someone who lacks confidence and self-esteem. Standing straight up with shoulders back (not stiff or wooden) projects a more confident individual who is alert and

self-assured. Good posture, like all of the other body language elements, can be practiced and improved upon. Even your walk can be telling. Walking slowly and dragging your feet? Others will see you as lazy, tired, depressed, and unmotivated. Walking too fast? This sets you up as someone who is nervous, stressed out, or unable to manage their time. Walk briskly and purposefully with good posture. This is the winning combination that says your efficient, energetic, positive, and upbeat.



Gestures: Gestures add life to conversation and can help to emphasize points. We generally gesture with our hands, arms, heads or in combination. There are two gestures to avoid; Finger pointing is rude and it generally makes others feel like they are being scolded. The other is folding your arms across your chest. You look defensive or as if you want to distance yourself. Uncross your arms and lower them to your sides for an open body stance that makes you appear to be friendly and approachable.

Facial Expressions: Our faces are open books. Facial expressions help others better understand our verbal message. They help impart the true meaning of our words and they assist us in sharing our feelings and emotions. 1) Your facial expressions must coordinate with what you and the other per-

son is saying. Some people are not aware that their facial expressions don't match the verbal exchange. 2) Your facial expressions should never indicate that you are being sarcastic, condescending, or disdainful. That little smirk or roll of the eyes by the person speaking? Others will notice and may judge you negatively.

How You Sound:

Your vocal impression is formed by how you speak, not what you say. How your voice sounds strongly impacts how others perceive you. There are many things that contribute to your vocal image, but these four are most important: pitch, intonation, rate of speech and volume.

Pitch: This refers to how high or low the tone of your voice is. A low-pitched voice is more pleasant to listen to than a high-pitched voice. A low-pitched voice gives you credibility and adds comfort rather than indicating some nervousness.

Intonation: Having an even pitch, evenly timed words, lack of emphasis, and insufficient pauses leads to speaking in a monotone voice which leads to boredom. You don't want to put people to sleep. Strive to speak with some energy and variety in your voice. Get comfortable using your voice from a higher to a lower pitch, pausing occasionally, and emphasizing certain words for effect.

Rate of Speech: You don't want to speak too slowly or too quickly. Speaking too slowly or too many pauses will bring your listener to boredom. Speaking too quickly will create a problem for listeners who are trying to follow your message and they will give up. If you have a heavy accent, you must slow down if you are to be understood.

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Volume: You don't want to blast everyone out of the room, but you do want to be heard. Listen and learn from other people you admire and respect. If you speak too softly, you appear timid and unsure of yourself. If you speak too loudly, you appear too pushy and aggressive. The situation, location, and even the size of the room may influence your voice volume. In general, it is best to aim for a volume that is pleasant to listen to and showcases you as a confident speaker.

What You Say:

This means the actual words that you speak. So, how can you make a good first impression with your spoken language? Watch what you say. The following three things will help you give a spoken image that says you're a business professional: having a good vocabulary, tempering disagreement and speaking up.

Have a Good Vocabulary: Vocabulary is an important part of your verbal image. Work at having a solid vocabulary that will truly express your thoughts. A good vocabulary will also serve you well as a listener. You will be able to advance much further in your career if you are able to express yourself well and understand others as they express themselves.

Tempering Disagreement: You might think that being direct is a positive way to express yourself, but if you are too direct, others might see you as inflexible and closed-minded. Strong direct remarks like "You're wrong!" can be interpreted as embarrassing "put downs" to others. By softening the disagreement, you appear as someone who is able to compromise and find common ground to work toward a solution. Examples: "I can see your point" coupled with "Have you considered...?" Try using words like "could... would... and should..." and let those words allow you to sound less rigid.

Speaking Up: Don't be a silent partner. It's important to express your opinions and share your ideas. Prepare for meetings in advance to be able to participate. Have something valuable to say and stay on the subject. Be ready and willing to contribute.

What Not To Say:

It only takes one misstep to detract from the image you have worked hard to develop. Be sure that your spoken word reflects who you are and the company you represent. Avoid language that falls into these following categories:

Sexist and Racist Language: Let's agree that it doesn't belong in the workplace. Companies are particularly sensitive to language that is considered sexist or racist because it creates a negative work environ-

ment. Something said in jest might still be something that is grounds for legal action. Your use of racist or sexist language paints you as unprofessional by your co-workers and management.

Rambling: When speaking at work or other places, stick to the subject. Rambling and going off on unrelated tangents tells others that you have a disorganized thought process. Remember, less is usually more. Think before you speak, take your time, organize your thoughts, and choose your words wisely.

Profanity: What might seem acceptable language to some is not to many others. You should never use expletives and vulgarities under any circumstances in the workplace. There are some words that might not be considered profanity, but are crude or rude. Stay away from common expressions that come from the familiarity of your social settings, and really have no business being carried over into the workplace where it can be overheard by customers, co-workers, and management.

Gossiping: As a new worker trying to establish themselves in the workplace, it would be smart to steer clear of gossip, engaging in negative talk about others, or passing along hearsay. Your presence, even if it is a silent presence, indicates involvement and support of gossip. Simply excuse yourself with a reasonable excuse – like work – and step away. When it comes to a professional image, you don't win if you gossip or even if you choose to criticize those who do. Plan on winning in the workplace by focusing on your work and not worrying about the habits of those around you.

Complaining: No one likes a complainer. There are some people who are never positive. They will complain about the workload, the boss and co-workers, the office equipment, etc. Studies have shown that employers value employees who demonstrate a positive attitude toward their work. One way to do this is to ensure that you don't say negative things that will drain your morale and that of your co-workers. Be Positive.

Remember, IMAGE MATTERS. How you present yourself – how you look, what you say, and how you say it – has a strong impact on your success and advancement in business. You will be judged on a daily basis by everyone you come in contact with. You have a choice. You can make those opinions work in your favor by leaving a positive impression. These ideas can go a long way toward helping you create a positive professional appearance, a stronger sense of confidence, and a rewarding business image that points you on your way toward success.

SOURCE:

Diance C. Decker, Victoria A Hoevemeyer, and Marianne Rowe-Dimas: Authors – First Job Survival Guide: How To Thrive and Advance In Your New Career ~Ed Duda, Career Planner, Workforce Development, Inc., Olmsted County

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