

The art of giving good instructions

Giving instructions is an important management skill. And it is a skill—one you can learn and improve. Here are some guidelines from the pros:

Know what you want. Define the task in your own mind, thinking it through step by step up to the result you want. Or do the reverse, starting with your desired result and figuring out how to get there. Then write it down. Even if you think the instructions are clear in your mind, reading them over in writing gives you a chance to consider better or simpler ways to achieve the same result.

To further test how well you've laid out a task or problem, try following your instructions yourself. You may find out you've left out important facts or details. Once you've come up with a good, precise description of what you want done, putting it in writing for the employee provides a handy reference.

Recognize feelings. Once you know what you want, ask yourself how you and the employee involved may feel about the task, because that will affect how you deliver instructions and how they're heard. For example, suppose you're instructing two new employees who you didn't ask for and who have shown up earlier than expected. If you feel angry and pressured, and they feel confused and defensive, those emotions will get communicated more clearly than will any instructions—unless you acknowledge those feelings beforehand.

Check what the employee knows. Obviously, you shouldn't give employees instructions they don't need. But even if you're sure employees need the instruction, it helps you communicate, and helps them understand, if you can connect your instructions with the knowledge they already have. Break down your instructions into small pieces that relate to things they already know, and the information will be absorbed more easily and remembered more clearly.

Don't demand, don't apologize. When giving instructions, you're helping employees—by conveying information they need to succeed— not punishing them. If you sound pompous or bossy, your instructions won't get the attention they deserve. However, asking questions like "Do you mind doing this for me?" can sound apologetic or misleading. It's your job to tell employees what to do. A straightforward, confident, yet considerate manner of speaking makes your instructions easier to hear.

What, then why, then how. Start by telling employees the results you expect and why the task and that outcome are important. Many people can follow instructions better when they understand why the task needs doing. Only then explain—and, when possible, demonstrate—how to do the task.