

Team communication: 18 tips to help you work together better

As a leader, you can't waste a word. Your team members will scrutinize everything you say, so you need to be sure that they walk away with the message you intended.

Adopt these habits to be an effective communicator

- 1. Always have a specific goal.** When you begin by knowing what you want others to do, preparing your remarks will be easier and your communication will be clearer. Your goal provides the framework for what you will say.
- 2. Think like your audience.** Saying what you want people to know isn't enough. By understanding what they need and want, you will be able to reach out to them more effectively with your message.
- 3. Specify the benefit.** People who understand what they have to gain are much easier to persuade. Don't assume that they will understand why they should do as you say. Spell it out clearly for your listeners.
- 4. Be yourself.** Bring out your passion about the subject and speak like you are talking with a friend. Sincerity will trump style every time.

Practice those habits and you will connect with your audience and persuade them to follow you. (Source: Dean M. Brenner, The Latimer Group.)

Set standards for working together

When team members take time to agree upon standard practices for their group, they avoid misunderstandings, confusion and frustration. Lead your team in a discussion of topics like these:

- 5. Work hours.** With people in different time zones or working flexible schedules, team members can't rely on reaching one another immediately. If employees know their colleagues' schedules, they will know when to expect a response.
- 6. Shared calendars.** Online calendars allow teammates to see others' availability and ease scheduling. Decide how much detail to include. Examples: Do employees need to log their lunch hour? Will you post deadlines on personal calendars or another system.
- 7. Preferred communication style.** Often the message dictates the best way to contact someone, but not always. Find out whether team members prefer instant messages or phone calls, for example.
- 8. Level of formality.** What one person considers an efficient message can seem brusque to someone else. Establish ground rules to avoid misunderstandings. For example, should people always include email greetings or provide full contact information when they leave voice-mail messages?

9. File-sharing practices. Develop a system for naming and storing shared documents. That way, you avoid confusion over different versions of files and where to find documents.

10. Problem-solving. Before conflicts have a chance to fester, develop a procedure for airing concerns and dealing with them.

11. Delivering feedback. Together determine a process for providing feedback to one another. For example, you might meet weekly with each employee to talk about what the person is doing well and what could change. Also establish guidelines for when employees provide feedback to one another.

12. Socializing. Talking about things outside of work can increase the bonds among team members. Decide whether you will “friend” each other on Facebook or devote a few minutes during every conference call to sharing something about your life—whether it’s about your kids’ antics, your opinion on your favorite sports teams or something else.

13. Etiquette guidelines. Establish team rules to ensure that everyone is showing one another respect and kindness.

Communicate to lower stress

Too much long-term stress drives employees away—and in the meantime, their productivity plummets, performance lags and quality suffers.

Workplace stress is inevitable, but the problem is, so much of it is caused by simple communication failures—that ARE completely preventable. Fierce Conversations, a leadership development and training firm, offers this advice to alleviate stress—before it affects employees health and the bottom line.

14. Address issues openly. If you aren’t having authentic and effective conversations with your employees, you can’t address problems. When problems go unchecked, it weighs on individuals, teams and the culture. Start having conversations—even uncomfortable ones—to ensure you’re surfacing problems and resolving them quickly.

15. Don’t make assumptions about what employees want. Happy hours, an office game room and daily breakfast are great perks. However, most employees want a sense of purpose and meaning, development opportunities, and work-life balance. Find out what your employees want and need by conducting candid discussions.

16. Assess workloads. Overburdening employees with massive workloads can’t become the norm, but how do you know they are overloaded? By asking them. Let them know they can come to you if they are feeling overwhelmed, and even if they need a mental health day to recover.

17. Make room for white space. It’s more than a break. Creating white space means taking intentional pauses for thoughtful reflection. Make sure employees know that you want them to create breathing room in their work days to think, process and reflect on their work and decisions.

18. Stop being angry over failure. In a Deloitte survey, 82% of respondents said making a workplace error causes stress, creating a vicious cycle. Errors cause stress, and then stress leads to more errors. Ensure employees know that failure is part of risk, and grant them wiggle room to experiment or make mistakes. Otherwise, innovation will come to a standstill.