

# Coaching an employee with poor communication skills

When evaluating your team's performance reviews, you may encounter a few employees who lack practical communication skills. Despite their strong talents and overall solid performance, workplace communication is the one area where they need help.

It's imperative to make efforts to remedy poor communication wherever it exists in your organization — because, if left unchecked, it can lead to confusion, stress, and considerable losses. In fact, according to a survey of 400 companies with 100,000 employees each, they lost an average of [\\$62.4 million](#) each year due to communication problems. Smaller businesses (around 100 employees) weren't immune to losses because of poor communication skills either, as they lost an average of \$420,000 per year.

## *The solution?*

Engaging in one-on-one communication coaching sessions will help transform them into efficient verbal and nonverbal communicators. Organizations with strong communication & change programs in place are [3.5 times](#) more likely to outperform their peers. It's clear that the quality of your company's communication is vital to its health, which is why you need to coach your poor communicators to drop their bad habits as soon as possible.

Our guide on effective tips for coaching an employee with poor communication skills will help you get started.

## **Why bother with communications coaching?**

You may feel that there are more important things for you to focus on as a leader instead of communication coaching. *After all, isn't it more important to improve productivity and find ways to boost revenue?*

Well, if you handle the coaching process correctly, your productivity and revenue will improve as a direct result — AND your entire organization will enjoy better communication.

## **Other benefits include:**

- **Improved teamwork.** Good communication techniques are the backbone of team collaboration. If team members are confused about their tasks or goals, they'll waste a lot of time trying to get organized. However, if everyone is on the same page, team projects will go off without a hitch.
- **It naturally resolves issues.** If your employees are all trained communicators, they'll use their listening skills & emotional intelligence to resolve any workplace disputes without the need for mediation. By calmly deliberating, debating, and ultimately resolving issues instead of devolving into shouting matches or finger-pointing, your workplace will see far less conflict.

- **Stronger relationships with clients.** Improving your internal communication will also positively affect your external communication with clients. Transparency & active listening are two traits customers value the most, and communication coaching will elicit both in your employees.
- **It promotes employee engagement & trust.** If your employees engage in honest verbal & nonverbal communication with each other every day, they'll be far more engaged and trusting of each other — and of your leadership. The more your team trusts each other, the easier it'll be for them to achieve their full potential.
- **It fuels innovation.** You don't want your employees to simply go through the motions every day. Instead, you want them to fire on all cylinders, brainstorming new ideas & innovations. The best way to do that is to elicit a company culture that rewards direct communication and constructive feedback.

While these are by no means the only benefits you'll see from improving your organization's communication, they are among the most impactful.

### Face-to-face coaching sessions

You'll want to engage in one-on-one coaching sessions to improve the poor communication skills of specific employees. If possible, it's best to conduct these sessions in person. If it isn't, you'll have to use video chat — but make sure you can see the employee. Audio calls won't work because you'll need to work on nonverbal cues like eye contact, facial expressions, and body language.

Coaching sessions are so effective because they provide **accountability appointments**.

*What are those?*

An accountability appointment is a regular meeting where you check up on an employee's progress toward a specific goal. According to a study by The Association for Training and Development, having regular accountability appointments with a manager causes the probability of reaching a goal to reach **95%**.

So if your goal is to improve their communication skills, implementing regular coaching sessions will basically guarantee their success — so long as you do your part by providing real accountability. It's also far more effective to sit down and coach employees than it is to have them view training videos or e-learning modules.

### Objectivity and a roadmap for success

Another reason coaching sessions work so well is they provide objectivity for your employees. As their coach, it's your job to engage them with no bias. *It's crucial to let the employee know that there's no judgment on your part.* You're not here to tell them that they're a bad person for lacking certain communication skills.

Instead, you're their partner in formulating a winning communication strategy. That means identifying their primary weaknesses and making efforts to improve upon them.

Before you start coaching the employee, ask yourself this question. *What do they struggle with the most?*

It could be that they struggle with written communication, or their tone of voice could be throwing everyone else off. Whatever it is, it's imperative to identify their primary problem areas in advance. That way, you can start developing a roadmap for your coaching sessions.

For instance, if an employee has trouble listening, your coaching sessions should focus on practicing things like

active listening and running listening exercises — with the ultimate goal of improved listening skills. Each coaching session will act as a milestone toward the ultimate goal, which is the best way to structure your roadmap.

You'll also want to get the employee's point of view on things, including their input on your roadmap. That will ensure that you wind up with a coaching plan uniquely tailored for each employee. Since everyone has a different communication style, there's no one-size-fits-all approach to coaching sessions.

Lastly, you'll need to establish a clear **timeline** for achieving your ultimate goal. In the case of the poor listener, you could plan on having **30-minute meetings twice a week for six weeks**. Setting a time limit will help accrue a sense of urgency in both you and your employee, which will increase your chances of success.

## Initiating communication coaching

The first step in coaching an employee with poor communication skills is often the hardest — which is approaching them and letting them know about the issue. It's highly likely that the employee in question won't even be aware that there's a problem, which presents another challenge.

The last thing you want is to end up offending them by accusing them of being a poor communicator, so you must approach the situation with tact. At the same time, you must be honest and not sugarcoat the problem, as if it's severe enough to affect their performance, it needs addressing.

Start by sitting down with the employee and letting them know all the ways they're knocking it out of the park. Give credit where credit is due, and then move on to the communication issue. Tell them that you've closely evaluated their performance and that you've noticed some issues with their communication skills. Instead of using a negative or accusatory tone of voice here, it's better to use a concerned tone.

Your goal is to let them know that you're only here to help them improve. That's when you can tell them about the communication coaching sessions you're going to have while making sure to listen candidly to their input.

It can help to write down their primary pain points (or have some written down in advance) to keep the conversation informational and straightforward to follow.

### An example would look like this:

- Active listening
- Soft skills
- Nonverbal cues

A simple bulleted list is all you need to direct the conversation, so you don't need to get too in-depth with it. After you've hit them with the areas they need to improve, give them some time to respond and give their two cents. After that, it's time to move on to the next steps.

### Explain why communication is vital

If the employee doesn't know why strong communication is integral to the health and success of an organization, you should educate them. A great way to get the message across is to share the statistics from the beginning of this article.

Poor communication makes companies waste millions of dollars annually due to confusion, arguments, and costly mistakes. Conversely, rock-solid communication leads to enhanced productivity, revenue, and job satisfaction.

Really drive the point home that by becoming a better communicator, they will enjoy increased levels of job satisfaction, boosted productivity, and may even earn more as a result. Once they realize how essential improving their communication skills is, they'll be far more likely to give it their all during your coaching sessions.

### **Include their feedback & ideas**

It can't be understated how important it is to include the employee in the coaching process. At every step of the journey, you need to take some time to hear their side of the story. Not only will this help you better understand the employee, but they'll also feel more engaged, respected, and heard.

Also, you never know when the employee may have a valid suggestion for your coaching sessions. For instance, they may know of a way to shorten a task or exercise, which will save you both time. You may miss out on their valuable insight if they don't feel like they can speak up and voice their opinion.

### **Provide examples of effective communication**

It's your employee's goal to transform into an effective communicator, but that's difficult if they don't know what one looks like. That's why you need to provide candid examples of strong communication for them to mimic.

*Don't be afraid to get creative here, either.*

As an example, if the employee has trouble listening, you could show them scenes from a movie where one character is actively listening to the other. Or you could consult Morgan Freeman's acting advice (he swears by LISTENING to his costars instead of simply waiting for his turn to speak).

The more your employee sees excellent communication skills in action, the easier it will be for them to modify their own behavior to follow suit.

### **Encourage plenty of practice**

Practice makes perfect, so your employees must designate practice time each week to work on their communication skills. You'll only be able to achieve so much in 30-40 minute coaching sessions, so you'll need to assign plenty of homework to keep your employees practicing.

During the session, you can introduce specific training exercises for the employee to repeat during the week. Whenever you meet again, test them on what they learned to see if they actually put in the work. This type of accountability is what it takes to reach the 95% success rate mentioned in the study above, so ensure you always check your employee's homework.

If they neglect to practice consistently, there have to be consequences. You can choose to extend the coaching sessions, or you can take disciplinary action, such as written warnings or suspensions. The punishment doesn't have to be severe, but there must be the threat of consequences for an accountability system to work.

### **The most common types of communication issues**

Now that you know what goes into coaching an employee with poor communication skills, let's learn more about the problems many employees face when communicating. From not listening to avoiding phone calls, there are

many types of issues that can arise when employees communicate, and here are some of the most prevalent.

## **Confrontational messaging**

Some employees struggle with maintaining their calm while working out a conflict. Whenever a disagreement arises, they find themselves becoming visibly frustrated & angry. This comes through in their demeanor, body language, and tone of voice.

You can implement some confrontational messaging practice exercises in your coaching sessions to solve this problem.

Sit down with the employee and act out real-life conflicts that made them become angry. Help them realize that becoming frustrated will only cause more problems. If they feel themselves beginning to lose control, advise them to step away and take several deep breaths before returning.

Consider working through ways they could have approached that situation differently. Focus on how those approaches could lead to a more positive outcome.

## **Poor word choice**

When communicating at work, employees need to choose their words carefully. That's especially true when challenging a coworker's opinion or respectfully disagreeing with someone. If an employee has poor word choice, it can cause them to get into heated conflicts that could have otherwise been avoided.

During your coaching sessions, hold exercises where the coachee has to approach uncomfortable subjects by carefully choosing their words. For example, a good exercise is to have the employee express that they want a coworker to not listen to the radio in the morning.

**Poor word choice:** "Hey Steve, knock it off with the radio, would you? I'm trying to get some work done here!"

**An improved word choice:** "Hey Steve, I respect your right to play the radio during the day, but I'm having a really hard time focusing. Could you possibly turn it down a tad? Thanks!"

## **Body language**

Not all communication is verbal. In fact, a majority of communication occurs without speaking, so nonverbal communication skills are a must for employees. In particular, body language communicates a person's confidence level.

If they're making direct eye contact with their shoulders upright and a smile on their face, it's a sign that they're highly confident. Conversely, avoiding eye contact with slumped shoulders and a frown communicates insecurity and weakness, so it's best avoided (especially in sales positions where confidence is essential).

Body language is something that many people don't actively think about, so they might be giving off the wrong vibe unintentionally. Draw their attention to ways they can actively incorporate positive body language in their communication.

## **Voice modulation**

For clients & coworkers to engage with what an employee says, they need to have a bright, cheery tone of voice with plenty of inflections. A droning, monotone voice will lull listeners to sleep, and they'll have a harder time focusing on what an employee is saying. It's also crucial to speak at an appropriate pace and to use pauses to

separate sentences, thoughts, & ideas.

When coaching an employee with poor communication skills, practice the pacing of words while ensuring the coachee doesn't go too fast or too slow. Encourage them to use brief pauses between sentences.

Another activity you can do is to have them repeat the same sentence in different ways. Can you say the sentence "That's really interesting" in a way that makes you seem truly interested? Try it again, but try to convey a lack of actual interest. The same sentence can have a very different meaning based on how you say it.

### **Final thoughts: Coaching an employee with poor communication skills**

Effective communication is the cornerstone of any successful organization, regardless of industry. Poor communication at your company may cost you millions without even realizing it, so you need to pay close attention to your employee's communication skills.

Implementing one-on-one communication coaching sessions with employees will drastically help them improve the way they communicate, which will help the organization as a whole.