

Communication Skills for Leading and Managing Others

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify the 3 models of communication.
2. Compare and contrast verbal and nonverbal communication.
3. Describe common barriers to effective communication.
4. Discuss the coaching process.
5. Describe the 5 conflict styles.

ABSTRACT

Effective communication skills of supervisors, managers, and leaders are associated with employee job satisfaction, supervisor credibility, and improved organizational outcomes. Understanding the fundamentals and principles of communication is the first step to developing effective communication skills. Coaching employees and managing conflict are 2 situations in which effective communication skills improve outcomes. Effective communication skills may be learned.

ABBREVIATIONS: none.

INDEX TERMS: supervisor, manager, communication, conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

When an individual moves into a supervisory or managerial position or accepts a leadership position in their professional organization, their success is dependent on the people who they supervise, manage, or lead; they are evaluated on how well their employees or followers perform their duties and jobs. Effective communication skills are vital for those who manage or lead a group of people in a work or volunteer organization. Effective communication skills are needed daily to motivate, coach, and train employees. These skills are especially important in team building, implementing change, and handling conflict. There are numerous publications describing these topics

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in detail. The information described in this article is intended to provide basic concepts and serve as a foundation for pursuit of further knowledge.

Communication

Communication is “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.”¹ It is influenced by multiple contexts, such as the environment where it occurs as well as mental and emotional factors encountered by the parties involved in the process.² Effective communication is particularly important for individuals in leadership roles, such as supervisors, managers and leaders in professional society activities, because it is the key process used to achieve the goals of the organization. Effective communication is also associated with employee job satisfaction and perceptions of supervisor credibility.^{3,4} It is not an innate ability; effective communication is a skill that can be learned and developed with practice. There are 5 forms of communication: intrapersonal (reflective thinking), interpersonal (between 2 people), group (among 3 or more people), public (speaker to an audience), and mass communication (newspaper, television, or social media).² Interpersonal communication is the most common form; it takes place in planned and unplanned circumstances, often in a structured manner, and is susceptible to miscommunication and conflict.²

MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

There are 3 models of communication: *transmission*, *interaction*, and *transaction*.² An understanding of the principles for these models provides insight into their use for individuals in positions of authority, such as supervisors and managers.

Transmission Model of Communication

The premise of the *transmission model* is that communication is a thing (circumstance, event, or item) and that it is linear.² It is linear because it is unidirectional: the sender (speaker or writer) transmits the message to the receiver and the receiver interprets the message. There is no opportunity for the receiver to provide feedback to the sender to request clarification or additional information. Under this model, it is the responsibility of the sender to successfully convey the message because the receiver does not have an opportunity to request clarification.² This model is applicable for situations in which the receiver

is not present when the communication is sent, such as text, email, memo, and voice mail. The onus for effective communication rests on the sender (supervisor or manager) when using these methods of communicating to others (employees, colleagues, or superiors). The words and tone used for the communication (eg, memo or email) must be considered carefully based on the audience and the information shared.

Interaction Model of Communication

The *interaction model* of communication is a process. Participants (senders and receivers) provide feedback to each other by alternating as sender and receiver.² Unlike the transmission model, the interaction model incorporates feedback into the communication process. The receiver's responses provide information to the sender that indicate whether the receiver understood the sender's message. The correspondence allows the sender to clarify the message by rephrasing or adding additional information to their previous statements.

Transaction Model of Communication

The premise of the *transaction model* of communication is to create relationships and communities.² Much like the interaction model of communication, this model incorporates the information shared by both sender and receiver; however, the communication takes place simultaneously. Modifications in verbal statements are made based on the receipt and interpretation of nonverbal information. This model of communication is performed within a set of rules or norms that fit the situation in social and relational contexts.² Communication will be different based on the social setting (eg, workplace or home) and relationship between communicators (eg, acquaintance or long-time friend).

In general, communication is not as simple as one individual speaking and another listening. The communication process is influenced by the environmental (physical features of the environment) and psychological contexts (mental and emotional factors affecting both individuals) that impact its effectiveness.² Supervisors and managers primarily use the transmission and interaction models of communication in their daily interactions with their employees. An understanding of the transaction model of communication can provide valuable insight into effectively communicating with others.

COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Communication meets specific needs: physical, instrumental, relational, and identity.² Physical needs are those related to physical and social wellbeing, whereas instrumental needs focus on accomplishments (daily, short-term, and long-term goals). In the workplace, supervisor and employee primarily focus on instrumental needs,

using communication to share information, provide direction, and motivate performance; however, it is worthwhile to recognize that employees may also meet their relational and identity needs through communication with their peers and colleagues.

TYPES OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Information we share with others can be classified into 4 types of verbal communication: observation, thought, feeling, and need.² An observation is communicated using words that describe the situation (eg, seen, heard, or discovered). There is no judgment included in the observation (it is objective). Communicating thoughts requires an individual to draw conclusions that are influenced by the speaker's beliefs, values, and attitudes.² Feelings describe the emotions of the speaker, and needs convey information to accomplish activities, make plans, or take action.²

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication complements verbal communication; its 2 components—features related to voice (eg, pitch, volume, accent, pronunciation, or rate of speech) and body language (eg, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, gait, or posture)—are as important as the words that are spoken.⁵ Nonverbal communication is involuntary, an innate characteristic of humans, that either complements, reinforces, substitutes, accents, or contradicts verbal communication.^{2,5} As a supervisor or manager, it is important to be aware of nonverbal cues when sharing information with employees because if the nonverbal message is different or contradicts the verbal message, the outcome may be confusion, misunderstanding, or distrust.⁵

LISTENING

Verbal communication requires the listening process that also employs visual nonverbal information such as eye contact, facial expressions, and body language. There are 4 types of listening: discriminative, informational, critical, and empathetic.² Discriminative listening is used to differentiate a specific sound.² Informational listening requires concentration and memory skills for the purpose of comprehension and retention. The goal of critical listening, much like critical thinking, is to analyze and evaluate the information conveyed and the context in which it is delivered.² In empathetic listening, the listener attempts to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings.² Supervisors and managers primarily use informational and critical listening when interacting with employees; however, there may be situations in which empathetic listening may be employed.

BARRIERS TO VERBAL COMMUNICATION

A number of factors may impose barriers to verbal communication. Environmental factors influence listening, essentially impeding the receiver's ability to hear information that is shared. Examples of environmental factors include noise, lighting (too little or too much), temperature (too hot or too cold), arrangement of the furniture (barriers between parties influence the messages conveyed).² Physiological factors, such as illness or injury influence verbal communication, affecting both the listener and speaker. The stress, emotions, or mood of each party may influence the ability of the speaker to convey information and may influence the listener to interpret information fully, appropriately, and effectively.

Effective communication can be hindered when the message is too simple, vague, filled with jargon or verbal fillers (eg, "Um, you know"), full of information, delivered in a monotone voice, or conveyed along with distracting movements.² Each factor limits the listener's ability to receive and understand the sender's message.

Coaching Employees

Coaching is one of the most important components of a supervisor's or manager's job.^{6,7} Coaching is providing feedback to another individual about their behavior to improve performance in their job duties and responsibilities. Outcomes of employees' efforts attributable to effective coaching include increased productivity,⁷ improved customer loyalty,⁷ employee commitment and engagement,⁷ stronger team culture,⁶ and increased retention rates.⁷ Coaching, however, must be appropriate and effective; otherwise, it is harmful.⁷ The goal of the coaching session is to improve behavior and organizational outcomes.

Effective communication skills applied to general coaching principles are critical for coaching employees. First, it is important to provide feedback in a timely and specific manner.⁸ Timely feedback, provided close to the time when the behavior or event occurs, allows each individual to more accurately remember the circumstances surrounding the situation. Second, a description of the behavior or situation needs to be factual, and how that behavior impacted outcomes or services needs to be clearly stated.⁸ The description does not need to be lengthy or drawn-out; a sentence or 2 describing the behavior and how that behavior affected patient care, colleagues, or the organization are sufficient to explain the purpose of the conversation.

Third, it is important to refrain from sharing specific advice—giving a directive—in a coaching session initiated by the supervisor. It is more effective to identify behavior that needs to be improved and then ask questions to help the employee identify solutions to the problem.^{7,9} Asking open-ended questions that begin with "what," "how," "who," "where," or "when" allows the employee to evaluate and examine the situation.⁹ Using questions that begin with "why" feels confrontational and judgmental, and will

change the focus of the conversation from problem solving to blaming.⁹ It is best to take a position of curiosity when asking questions during the coaching session; otherwise, it feels like an interrogation.⁹

Fourth, after arriving at a solution, ask the employee to summarize the feedback and the proposed solution.^{6,8} This ensures that both individuals understand and agree on the solution. Clarifications can be made at this point if there is a disparity in understanding.

Finally, it is beneficial to keep notes of coaching sessions.¹⁰ It is important to follow-up with the employee after the coaching session and to document progress. Following-up with the employee after a coaching session is vital; otherwise, progress cannot be measured. It is also a time when further feedback, especially in the form of positive feedback, can reinforce behavioral changes.

There are 2 types of coaching: event-driven (previously described) and calendar-driven.¹¹ Event-driven coaching focuses on a specific event, occurs near the time of the event, is unscheduled, and can be initiated by supervisor or employee.¹¹ Calendar-driven coaching is scheduled, initiated by the supervisor, and focuses on work performed over a period of time.¹¹ Calendar-driven coaching events are more formal feedback sessions to discuss successes, problems, and lessons learned.¹¹ Calendar-driven coaching events are often used by managers and the supervisors who report to them; however, this type of coaching is also beneficial for employees during their probationary period and as a follow-up meeting to a coaching session.

Effective coaching requires effective communication skills regardless of the type: event-driven or calendar-driven. Verbal and nonverbal communication needs to be appropriate and fit the situation to ensure the employee understands the message. Facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice, posture, and attentiveness need to match the content of the message delivered.¹² During coaching events, facial expressions should convey interest, eye contact should be maintained, speech should be delivered in an even tone of voice, an open posture (eg, no arms crossed) should be maintained, and full attention should be given to the individual.¹² If the conversation is difficult—and most agree sharing feedback with another individual can be difficult—it may be helpful to spend time preparing for the coaching session by brainstorming questions to ask in advance.

Managing Conflict

Conflict can result from miscommunication, misunderstandings, differences of opinions, or failure to identify and communicate expectations. Although some conflict, such as differences of opinion (eg, when team members are strategizing a solution to a problem), is beneficial, if left unmanaged or managed ineffectively it can affect morale, productivity, result in a loss of business, or result in an increase in errors.¹³ Conflict can be managed using effective communication skills—verbal and nonverbal—

identified in this article; however, understanding the different conflict management styles may improve understanding of the situation.

Two widely used, yet similar, models to identify conflict styles are Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory (Rahim)¹⁴⁻¹⁶ and Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Each uses a 2-dimensional model that identifies 5 styles.¹⁹ Rahim's model identifies the 2 dimensions as concern for self (production-oriented) and concern for others (people-oriented), resulting in 5 conflict styles: *integrating*—high concern for self and others; *dominating*—high concern for self and low concern for others; *obliging*—low concern for self and high concern for others; *avoiding*—low concern for both self and others; and *compromising*—moderate concern for both self and others.¹⁹ Thomas-Kilmann Instrument identifies the 2 dimensions as assertiveness and cooperativeness, with similarly identified 5 conflict styles identified: *collaborating* (assertive and cooperative); *competing* (assertive and uncooperative); *accommodating* (cooperative and unassertive); *avoiding* (unassertive and cooperative); and *compromising* (moderate assertiveness and cooperativeness).^{16,18}

No 1 style is best for every situation, and using the same style for every conflict may not be appropriate. Each conflict management style may be effective in certain situations. Problem solving, sharing information, and examining differences is used in the *integrating* style.^{14,15} Satisfying the concerns of the other party, a style that fits if one individual believes they are wrong or the issue is more important to the other individual, is used in the *obliging* style.^{14,15} The *dominating* style uses behavior to win regardless of the needs of the other individual.^{14,15} Individuals who use the *avoiding* style do not address the conflict; they avoid the situation and do not engage in the conflict.^{14,15} A give-and-take approach characterizes the *compromising* style.¹⁴⁻¹⁸

Managing conflict is a specific communication skill; however, principles of effective communication still apply: one should state the purpose of a conversation—describe details of the situation or circumstance; use “I” statements, not “you” statements; ask open-ended questions; listen for understanding; acknowledge the needs of the individual; address behavior; and focus on the goal of session.²⁰ It is important to ensure nonverbal communication is congruent with verbal communication when holding a conversation regarding conflict. Finally, it is important to remember that conflict is a behavior, and it is managed in the same manner as other inappropriate behaviors in work settings.

SUMMARY

Communication is the process through which supervisors and managers perform their jobs. Effective communication—verbal and nonverbal—improves the quality of work-group outcomes. Developing effective communication skills is a process, and the first step to improvement

is awareness of its importance and recognizing the role supervisor's verbal and nonverbal communication has on others' behaviors. Coaching others and managing conflict require specific attention to the use of effective verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Next steps to consider include enrollment in training sessions, workshops, or courses and reading literature on communication for skill development. Lastly, it is important to remember that effective communication skills can be learned.

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