

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION FOR HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Communication is key in building and sustaining relationships – both personally and professionally. Your interactive ability affects how you resolve conflict and problems. Lack of healthy communication can lead to misunderstandings, trust issues, work difficulties, and angst. Try these suggestions for productive conversations:

Actively listen...

- Clear your mind to avoid wandering mentally. Internal chatter, such as thinking about what you'll say next or reflecting on something else, distracts you from actively listening.
- Focus on the individual's words. Give your full attention. Listen carefully to what he or she is saying. Use this as an opportunity to learn more about the person.
- Don't interject. Allow someone to talk without interruption until he or she gets to the point.
- Use body language to indicate your attention and interest. This includes maintaining good eye contact, leaning forward, and nodding your head. Keep your body relaxed.
- Avoid distracting behaviors, such as tapping your fingers, rubbing your leg, or checking your cell phone. These types of habits make it difficult to actively listen and distract the speaker.
- Use acknowledging responses, such as "Uh-huh," "Okay," or "I hear you." These encourage people to speak and show you're interested and open to what they're saying.
- Paraphrase what the person said. This demonstrates you've been listening and ensures your understanding is correct. Summarize the discussion before

concluding.

- Pay attention to non-verbal cues, such as body language and voice tone. This may give insight to what the person is thinking or feeling and how he or she is responding to you.
- Reply constructively. Let someone know you value their words, even if you don't agree. Avoid reacting negatively, such as criticizing, dismissing, or rejecting what was said.
- Respond appropriately. Clearly understand what the person needs or wants from you. Not sure? Ask for clarification. Answer suitably. Be careful not to give unsolicited advice unless specifically requested.

Intently speak...

- Before talking to somebody, make sure you have that individual's undivided attention. Eye contact is key.
- Have a clear objective. Structure your words and thoughts towards that goal. Be organized.
- Use "I" phrases – "I feel like this when", "I want to understand", or "I'm concerned that." Opening with the focus on your feelings may squash a defensive reaction.
- Apply open-ended questions that promote responses, such as "Tell me about" or "How do you feel when?" Avoid questions that encourage one-word answers.
- Share your feelings truthfully and respectfully. Identify the pressing issue and how it makes you feel. Avoid generalizing words such as "always", "never", or "ever." Remain tactful but assertive.
- Be optimistic. Highlight the person's

positive points. Be generous with praise. Make sure your feedback is constructive and not rude criticism.

- Productively answer back. Be respectful, calm, and upbeat. Think before you speak even if that means pausing for a moment to gather your thoughts.
- Request a summary. Find a polite way to ensure someone understood you. For instance, "Could you summarize our discussion to make sure we're on the same page?"

Tackle difficult issues...

- Address situations head on. Don't wait. You'll find it easier to maintain objectivity and self-control.
- Speak privately. Schedule a meeting where you won't be overheard or interrupted by others.
- Initiate the conversation. This can be uncomfortable. Consider saying, "I'd like your input to help us work more effectively," "I value your insights on this project," and so on. Put the person at ease.
- Think in advance about what you'll say. Be specific with concrete examples. Practice ahead of time, or role play the conversation with a trusted colleague.
- Let the person express opinions. This helps him or her feel valued, less defensive, and more open to hearing what you're saying.
- Talk about your thoughts. Phrases, such as "I'm worried or concerned", "I would like", and "I am sad about" ease tension and help someone truly hear you.
- Be open and encouraging. Develop relationships where people feel comfortable expressing feelings, concerns, and asking questions.

- Tailor your message for the individual, but keep explanations simple and straightforward.
- Don't avoid topics because you're nervous, unsure of the answer, or don't have time to discuss. If you can't address a question or don't have responses, be upfront – but say you'll find out, and do so.
- Be honest and straightforward. This builds trust. Cover all important points. Any avoidance may lead to continued problems. The person may also seek information elsewhere and be misinformed.
- Prepare for a negative response. Remember, the issue may be tough for the person to handle. You can't control someone's reactions, but you can anticipate and be mentally ready. If words escalate into anger, take a breather. Come back together, and calmly continue.

Commit to healthy relationships in the New Year!

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