

# How to Handle Difficult Communications

by Mike Hawkins

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What is the most critical skill to people's success – personally or professionally – yet also the most elusive? Time management? Strategic thinking? Discipline? Decision making? No. While these are important, they pale in comparison to communication skills. Attentive listening, asking relevant questions, showing empathy, and knowing how to handle difficult communications are the most critical to success. They are vital to building healthy relationships, exchanging ideas, sharing feelings, gaining buy-in, setting clear expectations, and working collaboratively. The lack of these skills is at the root of most conflicts, employee performance issues, failed projects, and lost opportunities.

You can be a subject matter expert, but if you can't communicate your ideas, your ideas are of little value. You can have a great vision for the future, but if you can't get people to buy into it, your vision doesn't matter. You can be a masterful doctor, dentist, or lawyer, but if you can't reassure or empathize with your clients, they will seek help elsewhere. You might adore your spouse, but if you can't constructively work through disagreements, your spouse won't feel your love. You might have a great product to sell, but if you can't articulate a compelling value proposition, you won't sell it. Your ability to communicate determines your success at work or home.

How do you rate your communication's skills? How well do you handle differences of opinion? How well do you overcome objections? You might communicate fine when in agreement with someone, but how about when you have a difference of opinion? Do you find disagreement acceptable, a minor annoyance, or justification for becoming defensive? When a coworker wants to try something at odds with your way of doing things, are you a good listener or do you defend your status quo? If your spouse has an opposing opinion on how to discipline a rebellious child, do you listen with the intent to understand and reach a compromise, or the intent to defend your approach? If your team doesn't buy into your idea, are you able to effectively talk through their concerns, or do you resort to telling them what to do?

If you're not a patient and empathic communicator, you're in good company. It is natural for people to defend their own ideas. Rather than seek to understand and consider new ways of thinking, people often default to defending themselves, or for the most immature communicators, to go on the counter attack. People logically understand that having differing opinions is all right and even beneficial, but emotionally love to have their ideas adopted by others. People also hate to be wrong. As a result, many people don't embrace disagreement and don't engage in constructive debate. Instead, they get hurt feelings, defend their ideas, miss out on opportunities to learn, and turn people off.

Here are some common communications issues preventing constructive dialog and how to handle them:

- **Inattentive listening** – Focus on what people are saying before formulating your response. Eliminate your distractions – mental and physical. Listen with the intent to understand, not to judge or respond. Make people feel valued. Ask questions. Probe, clarify, and paraphrase what you are hearing. Once you understand them and they feel heard, it is your turn. Ask them to do the same for you.
- **Differences of opinion** – Appreciate the value of differing opinions. Respect perspectives that are different from yours. Look forward to exchanging opposing ideas. Value people who expand your thinking and offer contrary opinions. Seek to learn, grow, and compromise rather than defend. Be open to challenging the status quo. It may feel good to be validated with someone else's similar perspective, but consider that one of you is redundant if you are thinking the same.

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- **Judgement** – Don't be quick to judge people's words and thoughts. Most people have honorable motives behind what they say and do. Their thoughts may not be worded very well, but before passing judgement, seek to understand their underlying motives. Understand their driving values and philosophies. The "why" behind their "what" will often be principled and possibly the same as yours if you take the time to understand it.
- **Exaggeration** – Some people exaggerate to make their point, especially those who are passionate about their topic. While people's exaggeration can be misleading and a turn off, don't dismiss ideas and opinions just because they are exaggerated. Find the kernel of truth in what people are saying. Their point may not seem to have much resemblance to reality, but look for the factual core nonetheless. It could be meaningful and very valuable to understand.
- **Boastfulness** – There is not much that turns people off more than arrogance and selfish pride. People who do and say things for the purpose of elevating themselves above others makes others want to find the nearest exit. It is particularly egregious when someone takes credit for another's work. Constructively confront those who don't give credit where credit is due, but be careful to discern between "selfish pride" and "unselfish pride". Consider people's motive. When someone talks about an accomplishment for the purpose of discussing the accomplishment rather than promoting themselves, their motive isn't self-serving.
- **Anger and rudeness** – When upset, customers, friends, and spouses can be rude and disrespectful. But unless someone is a heckler with no basis for their rant, let people vent. It is alright for people to be upset as long as they don't become violent. Listen to their feelings. Appreciate the source of their frustration and anger. Understand what is bothering them before responding. When you respond, start with empathy. Explain that you understand why they might be angry or how they feel.
- **Lying** – Everyone overlooks the truth at times. It might be for honorable motives, but causes problems regardless. Yet when you suspect someone isn't telling the truth, consider whether it is worth pointing out. Don't feel the need to confront every prevarication. Let people retain their dignity. They may be dealing with something that simply doesn't need to be exposed. If you do confront them, do it gently. Show sympathy for their underlying motive.
- **False assumptions and accusations**– People make assumptions without knowing the facts. They draw conclusions based on instincts and emotions - both of which can lead to incorrect conclusions and very bad decisions. Don't accuse people of doing or thinking things based on instinct or second hand information. Confront people with known facts and direct observations. If you must communicate assumptions, say something like "It appears that you ...", "It seems that you ..." or "I feel that you ...".
- **Quietness** – People don't always say what they are thinking, especially introverts. If you are the quiet type, try to over-communicate. Speak up when in meetings or social settings. If you manage, work with, or have relationships with introverts, dedicate time to catching up and talking through any issues. Ask questions to get the conversation started and continue asking questions to sustain it. Ask for their opinions. Get them not just mentally engaged, but verbally engaged.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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