

Communication Skills

The Keys to Successful Conflict Resolution

It is difficult to handle conflicts well without strong communication skills. These skills offer a better range of tools to help navigate through the conflict resolution process. It is useful to work on one-on-one communications as well as working on handling specific conflicts.

Most conflicts provide less than ideal conditions for using good communication skills. When approaching an opening night, a major exhibition, or fine-tuning a new production, everyone may be stressed and preoccupied with their own responsibilities. What can a cultural manager do under those circumstances? There are key communication rules that will help achieve a satisfactory outcome in almost any conflict situation.

Maintain a Supportive Atmosphere

Atmosphere is of course an intangible, but its effects are felt by everyone involved in a conflict. How things progress will be largely affected by the kind of atmosphere that develops. Atmospheres can be described in many ways: cool, honest, frantic, overpowering, and friendly are just a few. For the purpose of resolving conflicts, only two atmospheres matter: defensive or supportive.

A *defensive atmosphere* is created when the people involved start criticizing each other, act superior, or try to control each other. The effects of a defensive atmosphere on the communication process are that the people involved share less information, trust each other less and are generally less effective in problem solving.

Supportive atmospheres on the other hand are created when everyone involved makes an attempt to see things from the other person's perspective. In a supportive atmosphere, people listen to each other and focus on helping find solutions that satisfy everyone's needs. Supportive atmospheres are particularly conducive to resolving difficult conflicts.

A FIRST COMMUNICATION RULE

Take the time to consciously build and maintain a supportive atmosphere, regardless of the complexity

Stay Assertive

The ways we influence people can be divided into three broad categories: aggressive, passive, and assertive. Aggressive approaches are domineering, pushy, and self-centered. Passive strategies are compliant, apologetic, and self-effacing. Assertive strategies are open, direct, and receptive. The problem with aggressive or passive influence approaches is that they consider the needs of only one party. Aggression leads to ignoring the interests of the other party and passivity leads to ignoring one's own needs. Either approach can result in a less than satisfactory outcome.

Maintaining an assertive approach is the best way of ensuring that all parties' needs will be heard and satisfied. And, because being assertive includes being open and receptive to the concerns of others, assertiveness on the part of all parties will improve the chances of a win-win outcome. Remaining assertive when confronted with a difficult person in a conflict situation is easier said than done. But it's important to stay aware that it's a key communication skill.

A SECOND COMMUNICATION RULE

Stay assertive regardless of temptations to behave otherwise. This means being clear about your own needs at the same time as being considerate of the other party's needs.

Actively Listen

It is necessary to concentrate on listening actively if the aim is to understand the meaning and the intent of the other person. This may sound simple but imagine the difficulty of listening to someone else when all you can hear is the mental noise of your own arguments and feelings. Listening and speaking seem to be skills that have to be practiced separately. Every management development program in recent memory has tried to help managers improve these skills. Nonetheless, few people do a noticeably good job of listening.

There are a few components of effective listening that everyone can learn and put into practice. Here are some of the important ones for consideration:

- Use body language to let the other party know that you are trying to listen. Make eye contact, lean slightly toward the other person, and remain silent until the other party is finished.
- Allow enough time for everyone to express their concerns, while setting reasonable limits so that the conversation can move onto solutions. Often people repeat negative comments when they do not feel heard. Remember not to take negative comments personally.
- Focus on clarifying what the other person is saying instead of thinking about what you'll say when it's your turn.
- Try summarizing and paraphrasing the person's message occasionally, particularly when it is long and involved. Doing this helps the other party feel that they really have been heard. However, don't do it too frequently because it may sound phony and annoying. It is most important to paraphrase when you aren't sure if you've grasped exactly what the other person is saying.

A THIRD COMMUNICATION RULE

Make every effort, both verbally and nonverbally, to let the other person know that you are listening and interested in what is being said.

Continually Probe for More Information

It is important to probe when you need more information or aren't clear about what the other person is *thinking*. People often say things that sound plausible on the surface, but until we hear more detail, your information may be incomplete and your conclusions wrong. Probes may take the form of open-ended questions, meaningful pauses, requests to enlarge on an idea, encouragement, closed-end questions, leading questions, and summarizing statements. With a little practice you can learn which probes will start productive discussions and keep them going, and which ones shut the conversation down.

A FOURTH COMMUNICATION RULE

Probe as much as possible to make sure that you have all the necessary information you need about the other party's perspective, so that you clearly understand the other party's position.

Be Sensitive to Nonverbal Clues

So far we've identified four key communication skills that are primarily verbal in nature. The next rule suggests that managers also require an exceptional sensitivity to what is happening *nonverbally*. Nonverbal communication includes everything other than what is actually said. It includes how people sit, eye movement, gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions, and fidgeting with things like pencils and eyeglasses. Experts estimate that more than half of the meaning of a message is transmitted nonverbally. Of course, what people say matters; however,

the fact is that everything else they do is often more important than what they actually say.

How do you know when the other person is really ready to start talking seriously about resolving the conflict? If you watch for nonverbal signals, you won't need to be told. You'll know that the other person is ready, for example, when they stop paging through notes, having side conversations with others, or takes on a posture of readiness. How do you know when the other person is starting to resist your suggestions? A grim facial expression, crossed arms and legs, or tightening the grip on a pen may speak as clearly as anything they say.

We all unconsciously and regularly respond to the nonverbal behaviour of others. We develop this sensitivity and responsiveness from birth. Most of the time we aren't aware that we're relying on the nonverbal signals of others to help decide our responses to them. As a manager, however, if you want to be effective in a conflict situation, you'll make it your business to watch for and study this behaviour, and respond appropriately to it.

A FIFTH COMMUNICATION RULE

Be very sensitive to the range of nonverbal behaviours that the other person is consciously sending you. Those clues may tell you much more than what is being said and help you move towards resolving the conflict.

Be Aware of Cultural Differences

All of the five communication rules described above can be affected by differences in culture that may result in subtle or significant gaps in understanding and interpretation. A cultural manager may be attempting to establish a supportive atmosphere and remain assertive. However, expecting everyone to speak clearly may run counter to cultural traditions of respect for elders, or not contradicting superiors,

or working on relationships before getting into specifics. How a cultural manager demonstrates active listening might be understood differently by people from diverse cultures; for example, looking down rather than eye-to-eye is a sign of respect in some cultures. Probing, even for clarification, may be seen as a sign of disrespect if it interrupts what the person is saying. Gestures and other body language may have alternate meanings in some cultures; for example, nodding may mean that the person is listening rather than in agreement with what is being said.

Laying the groundwork for good communication across cultures and traditions includes learning about the different cultures of people you work with, doing your own research (it is not up to other people to educate you), and asking colleagues about their weekend, their family, their life as part of everyday conversations. In conflict situations, ask for their help to develop the right atmosphere, to be open and receptive to the concerns of others, and to listen to each other, respectfully clarify needs and wants, and understand each other's non-verbal cues.

A FINAL COMMUNICATION RULE

Learn about the cultures of people with whom you work or are in partnership with. Ask for their help to build an atmosphere of support and understanding so that you can work together to find a solution to the conflict.