



Interpersonal Communications

“I just can’t seem to keep good help,” is the lament of many agricultural employers. The following comment of a skilled mechanic suggests one reason why:

Speaking as one who made more money as an independent contractor and went back to wage employment with a single company, the reason I decided to be an employee again was my boss. My boss treats me with respect and often takes just a little bit of time to let me know that my contributions are important and that he appreciates my ability. This shouldn’t be so rare, but it is. You want to keep worthwhile staff? Treat them as if they are special, because they are.

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An opportunity to earn greater pay may be the most common factor that contributes to employee turnover. Often, however, workers’ main impetus to leave is how they are treated, especially how direct supervisors talk to them on an individual basis. Today, interpersonal communication is one of the most important skill areas for managers in agriculture and other fields. Most communication in agricultural workplaces takes place orally and informally through non-verbal expressions and spoken rather than written words. Among the purposes that informal communications serve are the following:

- Informing about company plans, procedures, or rules
- Learning about employee abilities and extending a job offer
- Giving advice
- Obtaining information or ideas
- Assigning work
- Teaching skills
- Resolving conflicts
- Evaluating performance
- Taking corrective or disciplinary action
- Coping with resistance to change
- Dealing with criticism and anger
- Terminating the employment

Effective communication occurs when the sender and receiver of a message both understand the message the same way. Beliefs, expectations, hopes, and the other thoughts of both parties affect the interpersonal communication process. People often assume they have successfully delivered or understood a message when in reality they have not. Communication involves more than just talking. It also takes deciding what to say and how, listening, “decoding” signals—words and body language—and checking back on the accuracy of interpretation.

Communication Skills

Like any skill-building process, learning to be a better communicator takes place in stages. When first learning to drive a car, people do not know all the necessary skills and how to apply them. Gradually, they become conscious of and increasingly comfortable with steering, navigating through traffic, and using the brakes, accelerator, clutch, and gas pedal. Eventually, most drivers do all of these things without even thinking about them; the skills come into play automatically. Similarly, managers who make an effort can use new communication skills without conscious intent. Three important communication skills are active listening, speaking, and using body language.

Active Listening

Listening is not the same as waiting for another person to finish talking so you can have your say. Listening for the message is as important to successful communication as sending it. Most people, however, give much less thought to how they listen than to how they speak. Active listening means committing to listen, staying focused on what a speaker is saying, and avoiding distractions from outside or inside such as thinking about what you are going to say in response. Managers and supervisors who practice active listening techniques are more likely to pick up what employees, family members, and others are trying to get across to them.

Suggestions for Better Listening

- *Eliminate distractions.* Put down the book or newspaper. Turn off the radio, and shut off the computer. Show by actions that you are giving your full attention.
- *Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.* Looking at the speaker both allows observation of gestures and facial expressions and tends to increase interest in the speaker.
- *Keep responses to a minimum, but let the speaker know you are listening.* An occasional nod, “uh-huh,” or “I see” is an adequate signal.
- *Be patient.* Good listeners show respect by allowing the speaker to talk without being rushed, interrupted, or constantly pushed for additional detail.