



Likewise, some habitual or unconscious body language distracts from communication. Gestures that interfere include:

- Fiddling with pen or pencil
- Chewing gum or tobacco
- Rubbing beard or mustache
- Smoking
- Tapping fingers or feet
- Locking arms across chest
- Clasping hands behind head
- Invading a speaker's personal space
- Turning body sideways to another person
- Raising volume or pitch of voice beyond listener's comfort level

Applying Skills to Situations

Giving and Receiving Criticism

Many people are uncomfortable dealing with criticism as a listener or a speaker. Giving useful feedback, especially corrective or negative feedback, requires a heightened sensitivity to the receiver's perspective and tune-out threshold. When people feel unfairly criticized, attacked, or threatened, their protective reactions often hinder further communication. In addition to the techniques discussed in the preceding sections, the following guidelines can make these information exchanges more constructive:

- Choose a low-stress time to provide critical feedback.
- Offer criticism in private.
- Allow enough time to discuss reactions, implications, and plans for adjustment.
- If unsure of how an approach will come across, try it out in role-play with another manager or family member.
- Consider in advance what you would like to be different and why.

- If possible, lead into the discussion with warranted praise.
- Show concern and offer help in the form of specific solutions and directions.
- Speak in terms of a problematic behavior, not of the person.
- Emphasize description rather than evaluation. Describe what upset you rather than assailing the person whose behavior caused the upset or problem.
- Restrict comments to the present situation without connecting it to old baggage.

Common reactions to criticism, even when well intended and carefully given, include demoralization, anger, aggression, competitiveness, avoidance, and withdrawal. Personalities condition working relationships and comfort with different styles of communication. For example, a “bottom line” person often finds it frustrating to work with someone who spends a lot of time explaining details and alternatives before giving instructions. Conversely, someone who likes details can find it hard to work with a person who sums up everything in a single sentence. Such differences often magnify the difficulty of hearing and accepting criticism. People who want to minimize their emotional responses and learn as much as possible from criticism may find it helpful to keep in mind, and sometimes ask, the following:

What is the problem the critic is trying to bring to my attention?

What are the critic’s concerns? Can specific events that led to this criticism be identified?

Specifically what went wrong in each event, and how could I have avoided it?

What can I take away from this conversation and apply right away?

Moving from Resistance to Problem Solving

Communication techniques can be used to redirect conflicted conversations to effective problem solving. Imagine you’re in a hurry trying to drive a combine or loaded grain truck across a field. At random intervals, it won’t budge. Your first reaction is likely to be to tromp on the accelerator. Not a good idea, as any experienced farmer will confirm. If a big, expensive piece of farm equipment is sputtering, it is time to stop and find out why. A quick check can mean the difference between getting the harvest in on time or getting stuck in mid-operation with a costly break down.

The same is often true with people. It seems the harder they are pushed with brute force, the less reliably they move. When meeting resistance from people who oppose and are critical of them, many people exhibit a reflex of either arguing back or defending their ideas. Rather than improving the situation, these responses often set off verbal ping pong matches, in which nasty comments escalate a conflict. Cousins Roy and Dave played some ping pong one day. See what happened in the following story: