



# **Communicating Effectively**



## Learning to Listen

### What You'll Learn in this Chapter

- learning to listen
- resolving conflict
- how to say “No”

You can't communicate effectively with anyone if you don't know how to listen. More than anything else, listening skills affect your life in a broad way—not just your career, but your personal life as well.

*The first few times you practice this listening technique, it may feel somewhat stilted and unnatural. Persist—it'll get easier, and it's worth the effort.*

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Learning to listen has 5 basic steps:

- Step 1.** Listen without interrupting—let the other person tell their story. Don't interrupt them or assume you know ahead of time what they're going to say. When they're talking, focus your energy on listening. Don't read your e-mails, get a cup of coffee, or have another conversation. Be conscious of your body language. It speaks loudly about your level of interest and attention. Most importantly, when another person's talking, don't make assumptions or jump to conclusions, or start formulating your response ahead of time. Let them finish their story.
- Step 2.** Take time to assimilate the message and summarize what you just heard back to them—this doesn't take much time. Most people are quick to boil down a story to the facts. Sometimes you need time to decode the gist of their message. If that's the case, take the time. It's perfectly acceptable to say, “You know, you've brought up some points that I'd like to take the time to think about. Can I think about this for an hour or so and get back to you?”

- Step 3. If their story is made up purely of inferences and conjecture, ask for the facts. Then, when you know the facts, you can go to them and say, “I’ve spent some time reflecting on the conversation we had earlier. Can we get together again and continue it?” When you re-start the conversation, begin by summarizing what you think they’ve said. This demonstrates that you’ve taken the time to try to understand them.
- Step 4. See if they agree—if not, start at the beginning again. When you’ve reflected back to them what you think they said, ask if they agree with your summary. You can do this by saying, “Correct me if I’m wrong. Your points (requirements, requests, etc.) are...” or “These are your points. Is my understanding correct?” or whatever’s natural for you. The point is that you’ve demonstrated your understanding, and now you’re checking to make sure that your understanding is correct. If it’s not correct, this is your chance to ask them to tell you again. This step is essential—before you can be understood, you need to make sure you understand others.
- Step 5. Then tell them what you think.

This 5-step approach to listening really does improve your listening skills. The first few times you practice this, it’ll sound and feel somewhat stilted and contrived. Don’t worry, with practice, it’ll become natural and second nature.

## Resolving Conflicts

Conflict rarely occurs, but when it does, it's typically something that most people find difficult. Take heart—as with active listening, the practice you put into conflict management skills can pay off!

Working as a contractor, the two types of conflict you may encounter are:

- **Personal conflicts**—these are conflicts that arise when two personalities clash. This happens for many reasons, and can most often be avoided completely if your professional behaviour is above reproach.
- **Schedule conflicts**—as a contractor, sooner or later you'll run into a situation where your projects overlap and create a conflict. This can be a challenge.

### Avoiding Personal Conflicts

The best way to resolve personal conflicts is to be proactive. As a successful contractor, you can practice specific behaviours that will help you keep on track with your supervisor and your team.

#### Be Approachable

Create an environment that enables people to feel comfortable approaching you. Approachability includes being polite when you let people know that you are busy and would rather not be disturbed at that moment. For example, when a co-worker comes by your office to chat, mention that you have an urgent task to complete and suggest that you meet for coffee later in the day to talk.

### **Keep a Healthy Relationship with your Supervisor**

Three words are key to maintaining this relationship:

- **Respect**—for your supervisor’s role and your role on the team.
- **Honesty**—letting everyone know how long tasks will really take, and why.
- **Trust**—when you’re unsure, trust your team to help you through.

Keep the respect, honesty, and trust in the relationship by sticking to the facts in your discussions—leave feelings and inferences out.

### **Have a Sense of Humour**

Clients like contractors who have a positive and constructive sense of humour—who can laugh at themselves and with others. Used without cynicism, sarcasm, or prejudice, humour is a constructive and healthy way to deal with stress and situations that require flexibility.

### **Maintain your Integrity and Trustworthiness**

Everyone values professionals who are truthful and accept responsibility for their own actions. Remember though, that it takes time to develop trust in a new relationship. When building trust, the best advice to keep in mind is the old saying, “Don’t do anything that wouldn’t make your mom proud.”

As a contractor, maintaining your integrity and trustworthiness also includes not speaking ill of those who are absent. If you make it clear that you don’t participate in gossip, people will trust you not to speak ill of them when they are absent.

## **Develop Interpersonal Savvy**

Interpersonal savvy is a complex behaviour to define. Savvy is the ability to relate well with all kinds of people, inside and outside the project. This doesn't mean you should spend excessive time building networks and socializing. Rather, pay attention to the values of the people you deal with, and remember those values.

## **Listening and Understanding**

Develop your active listening skills. You can communicate more effectively and avoid many conflicts when you learn to listen. To practice active listening skills, start thinking of the other person's message as a story—we all have a story to tell. When you actively listen to another person's story, you can avoid many misunderstandings and conflicts. Learn the four steps to better listening described in *Learning to Listen* on page 121.

## **Changing Demands into Expectations**

Asking someone to change something about their behaviour, performance, or attitude can carry a large emotional charge with it that shuts down the conversation right at the beginning and turns it into a confrontation.

*Resist telling people how something should be done. Instead, tell them what needs to be done. They will often surprise you with creative solutions.*

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You can invoke change without confrontation by carefully choosing your words. To eliminate, or lessen the emotional charge associated with a request for change, consider how your words impact the other person. Ensure that you engage them:

- without lowering their self-esteem.
- with a lower emotional charge.
- while minimizing the stress around the engagement, as stress inhibits further dialog.
- with an expectation, not a demand.

Here are some words that take a demand and turn it into an expectation:

<b>Instead of saying...</b>	<b>Say...</b>
<b>Should</b> <i>You should come in to work on time.</i>	<b>Want</b> <i>I want you to start coming in to work on time.</i>
<b>Must</b> <i>You must finish this tonight.</i>	<b>Prefer</b> <i>I'd prefer it if you finished this tonight.</i>
<b>Ought to</b> <i>You ought to have known better.</i>	<b>Wish</b> <i>I wish you would have known better.</i>
<b>Have to</b> <i>You have to tell me when you go out for lunch.</i>	<b>Like</b> <i>I would like it if you'd let me know when you go out.</i>
<b>Supposed to</b> <i>You're supposed to confirm everything like this with me first.</i>	<b>Could/might</b> <i>You might confirm everything like this with me in the future.</i>
<b>Will</b> <i>You will tell me when you fall behind schedule.</i>	<b>Is important</b> <i>It is very important that you tell me when you fall behind schedule.</i>

## Resolving Personal Conflicts

Occasionally, personal conflicts arise regardless of the level of professional behaviour you demonstrate. These personal conflicts typically happen when personalities clash. They can



also arise when an employee (or another contractor) resents your presence. In the worst possible scenario, you may have a personal conflict with your direct supervisor.

### **Resolving Conflicts with Co-workers**

When a conflict with a co-worker impedes your ability to complete your project deliverables, your reputation is at stake. This can happen if someone else on the client site just decides they don't like something about you, they don't understand you, they don't appreciate contractors, or they don't like your view concerning a key area of the project.

If this happens, try the following resolution process:

**Step 1.** Meet your co-worker in a neutral location, like a coffee shop, and talk about the problem.

In your conversation:

- State the facts with no emotions attached. Tell them everything you have done to contribute to the situation.  
For example, "I wanted to talk to you to clarify our working relationship. I called a project status meeting on Monday and you didn't come. You had a significant project piece to deliver to me on Tuesday and it's still not ready. Also, when I asked you to meet with me on Tuesday or Wednesday, you said you were too busy. My timeline is fixed on this project."
- Tell them in one sentence how you feel emotionally about the situation.  
For example, "When you aren't clear with me on your deliverables, I get frustrated because I don't know where we are on the schedule."

**Step 2.** Ask for their side of the story. If their side of the story is based on emotions instead of facts, ask them what facts led them to believe that.

For example, “So tell me, what’s happening with our relationship? How does this situation look from your side?”

This conversation should enable the two of you to understand the situation clearly from both sides. You each should identify your needs, verbally, or in writing. Then generate possible solutions and evaluate them against the list of needs. Hopefully you will find a solution or combination of solutions that enable you to resolve your issue.

If your discussion gets you no further in resolving the issue, move on to Step 3.

**Step 3.** If you cannot resolve the issue directly with your co-worker, then you must bring it up with your supervisor, assuming that it isn’t your supervisor with whom you have a problem. Tell your supervisor that you can’t complete your tasks to the best of your ability working with this person, and then list the facts. Tell your supervisor that you tried to deal with the problem in a frank discussion with your co-worker, but that no resolution was forthcoming. Ask your supervisor for help.

*Remember, you’re on a client site to deliver, not develop life-long friendships with all your co-workers.*

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### **Resolving Conflicts with your Supervisor**

If you have a personal conflict with your supervisor, you need to practice the same conflict resolution skills as you would with a co-worker. It is better to use a process and try to work on it than to leave the conflict to fester and grow. If you find that you cannot resolve the situation with your supervisor, stick it out to the end of your contract and then don’t renew.

## Resolving Schedule Conflicts

As a contractor, you're likely responsible for your own schedule. This means that you'll need to manage your time, and make sure that your tasks are scheduled appropriately to meet your deadlines. Two kinds of schedule conflicts can arise:

- Conflicts between projects—as a contractor, you might encounter a situation where you have projects that overlap. Obviously, you want to minimize this. If it does happen, remember to stick to your earlier commitment first.
- Conflicts within a project—depending on the nature of the project and the diligence of the project manager, you may encounter projects where you're expected to deliver on overlapping tasks. If you've committed to delivering these tasks, then you need to do what it takes to deliver them. The best way to deal with this type of conflict is to bring it to your supervisor and have him or her prioritize your tasks for you.

## Saying No

As a contractor, it's important that you find the balance between wanting to please the client with each request and being realistic in what you can deliver. The bottom line is that sometimes you'll have to say no to various people on your team.

You need to be realistic about what you can do. If a client asks you to commit to a deliverable within a specific timeframe, you need to know how much time the task will take. This means you may need to do some information gathering before you can answer. When you have a realistic idea of how long it'll take to complete the task, be truthful.

If the client asks you to accomplish the task in four days, and you know it'll take seven days, tell them. If they say they want it sooner, list the related tasks required to do the job, and ask them which of the tasks you can remove from the entire deliverable.

Once you know how long a task will take by identifying and adding up all the sub-tasks required to accomplish it, you have a better idea of whether the client's timeframe is possible. If it isn't possible to complete additional tasks because you're committed to something else, discuss this with your supervisor.

You may also have to say no to side tasks such as mentoring someone, checking someone else's work, or doing additional tasks for other people that are not project related. Tell everyone why you have said no to their request and suggest that if they are bringing another priority to you, you need to get your supervisor's approval to drop one important thing and move on to the next.

You may also say no for right now, and follow up with a different time that you can make the additional commitment.

*Saying no sometimes can be the greatest self-kindness.*

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Now you know about how you can work on a project team and things you shouldn't do as a professional contractor; read *Adding Value* on page 135 for ideas about what you can do at a client site to gain an excellent reputation as a contractor.

## Frequently Asked Questions

- Q** When I use the four-step approach to effective listening, it feels unnatural.
- A** The four-step approach will feel stilted and unnatural the first few times that you use it. Don't forget, you're likely changing a lifetime listening habit, and it takes some time for habits to change. Take heart, and keep practicing! Eventually, the four-step process will come so naturally that you won't realize you're doing it.
- Q** Is humour appropriate for a client site?
- A** Yes—with conditions. The right humour is appropriate and appreciated at a client site. Use humour carefully and constructively to deal with stressful situations. Stay away from humour that is cynical, sarcastic, or prejudicial. If you're not sure if your humour will be appropriate, don't use it.
- Q** How can I be proactive about resolving a conflict with a co-worker or supervisor?
- A** The key to proactive conflict resolution is to take responsibility for resolving the conflict yourself, and use a process. Stick to the facts—leave out the inferences and the feelings. After you've expressed your position, ask the other person for their position, and use your listening skills. Often, when you understand each other, you can agree on common needs, and a solution to the conflict will present itself.

**Q** How should I deal with hostile co-workers?

**A** Always approach a co-worker who impedes your deliverable directly and openly because your professional reputation is at stake. Use the process defined in *Resolving Personal Conflicts* on page 126 to explore the conflict, identify needs, generate solutions, and achieve a way to move forward.

## Things to Remember

- Effective communication is critical to your professional success.
- The biggest part of effective communication is effective listening.
- When resolving a conflict with a co-worker or your supervisor, stick to the facts and stay away from interpretations. Use a process.
- When you encounter a schedule conflict within a project, be realistic about how much you can accomplish and, if necessary, have your supervisor prioritize tasks for you.
- Sometimes you have to say no.

Notes