



YWCA CANBERRA

Online Mentoring for Women

Effective Communication

Effective Communication

The way we communicate can play a major role in the success of our personal and professional relationships, and can significantly influence our ability to accomplish what we want and need, and achieve our potential.

Words often play only a small part in the messages we communicate. Other factors, such as the way we present the words we use, our tone of our voice, and our body language – posture, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, personal presentation – all play a significant role in how we communicate. Of course, the way we communicate depends on who our audience is and what the context is. But whether chatting informally with friends or colleagues or participating in formal decision-making processes, how we communicate influences other people's response to us, and the outcome.

There are some useful strategies we can engage to communicate clearly and effectively, that help us nurture productive and respectful relationships, be influential, and achieve positive outcomes. These same skills can help us to manage disagreement and avoid conflict. In this module, we talk about the effective communication strategies of:

Active listening – a conscious and active approach to listening to others

Being assertive – expressing our views confidently and clearly without being aggressive or passive

Using “I” statements – expressing thoughts, feelings and needs without placing blame on others.

Active listening

Listening is just as important in the communication process as talking. Active listening is a way of listening that consciously focuses entirely on what the other person is saying, where the listener seeks to understand both the content of the message, and the emotions and feelings underlying the message. The listener is not required to agree with the speaker, just to try to understand what the speaker is saying. It's important that the listener suspends their own opinions and judgement, to fully attend to the speaker. Active listening is particularly useful in situations where understanding is critical, in emotionally charged situations, and in resolving conflict.

Skills for active listening

- Give the other person the space they need to talk. Avoid interrupting them.
- Focus your attention on the person speaking (it may not be appropriate to talk about yourself).
- Be interested and engaged, and show this in your body language, for example through nodding, leaning forward, and making or maintaining eye contact (though be aware, eye contact may be inappropriate in some cultures).
- Indicate whether you follow what the speaker is saying. Paraphrase their words demonstrating your understanding of what they are saying. Make sure you do understand, and if you don't, tell them. Don't pretend you understand if you really don't.
- If appropriate, ask questions – want to know more.
- Acknowledge how the speaker might be

- feeling, e.g. “you sound frustrated / upset / excited”.
- Be aware of non-verbal cues and respond to them.
- Allow silences in the conversation – you don’t need to fill all the space with talk.
- Try not to give advice – help the person find their own solution.

Being assertive

Assertiveness is a way of thinking, behaving and communicating that allows us to express our views and stand up for our own rights, while respecting the rights of others. Being assertive enables us to confidently and appropriately express our thoughts, feelings and needs, and deal with difficult situations without being passive or aggressive.

Assertive communication:

- is open, honest and respectful, where the points of view of all parties are heard
- respects everyone’s right to hold different opinions
- requires us to relate confidently and clearly to others, where the receiver of communication is clear about what is required
- facilitates effective negotiation and decision-making
- is not about always getting our way
- involves having control over one’s anger.

Being assertive makes communication more effective, unlike passive and aggressive behaviour, which can be unproductive and destructive, and may lead to conflict where resolution is unlikely. In passive behaviour, a person may ignore their own rights and allow others to infringe their rights. They may put themselves down, and not stand up for themselves or speak out. They may not state their own real feelings, ideas or needs, and their actions may not reflect how they really feel. What they want may be unclear. Passive behaviour can lead to the receiver feeling unsure, stuck or lost, responsible, frustrated, or angry.

In aggressive behaviour, a person may defend their own rights and seek to achieve their own goals whilst disregarding the rights and needs of

others. They may dominate or put other people down, and not listen to others. They may focus on blaming others whilst not offering solutions, and may be hostile or defensive in attitude.

Passive aggressive communication can be conveyed in an apparently polite or inoffensive way, be manipulative, ignoring or silent. Aggressive behaviour often stems from fear or lack of confidence. It can lead to the receiver feeling scared, intimidated, powerless, threatened, not worthy, not safe, or angry.

Skills and fundamentals for being assertive

- Maintain a healthy self-esteem! Believe in yourself and know your own worth. Be confident. Don’t put yourself down. Value yourself and your contribution.
- Learn to say ‘no’ with confidence. Recognise that others have the right to say no too, and don’t feel rejected when others say no.
- Don’t blame others.
- Be clear and specific when expressing your point of view. Say what you mean. Ask for what you want.
- Respect the rights and opinions of other people.
- Ask for and provide constructive feedback.
- Use active listening skills to engage meaningfully with others.
- Seek clarification when you do not understand something.
- Ask for help without feeling guilty, bad or inadequate.

- Constructively resolve conflict. Learn to deal effectively with people who are angry or aggressive.
- Use “I” statements (see next section).
- Be calm and controlled and do not lose your temper.
- Describe how you see the current situation and how you would like it to be different.
- Express your feelings without judgement or justification.
- Be respectful of others. Always communicate respectfully.

“I” statements

“I” statements begin with the word “I” and describe how a situation is for us – how we see it or what we are feeling – without laying blame on the other person. Using “I” statements allows us to take responsibility for our own feelings and our part in the situation. They allow us to clearly communicate the impact of another person’s behaviours or actions on us, and to offer a solution. When we use “I” statements, the other person is more likely to hear what we are saying and respond constructively to our concerns, rather than getting angry or defensive. Here is a guide:

I feel... [say what you feel]
 when... [state the issue or problem]
 because... [say how you are affected by the issue or problem]
 and from now on... [say what you want to happen].

For example: “I feel frustrated when I’m interrupted frequently, because I am working to a deadline but I’m getting distracted, and from now on I would prefer we agree on a time to discuss any issues that arise.”

“I” statements can also be used effectively in constructive criticism. For example, saying “I had to read that section of your report three times before I understood it”, rather than, “This section is worded in a really confusing way” or “You need to learn how to write more clearly”, removes the element of blame while providing constructive feedback on the report.

Reflective exercise

Learning the skills of effective communication can take practice. It might be useful to think of some different situations you have been in, or conversations you’ve had, and reflect on how you could have responded differently to the situation or communicated your response more effectively, and how you might have influenced better outcomes, by engaging the strategies of active listening, being assertive and using “I” statements.