

Interpersonal Communications in the Communications Center (CDE #16070)

By Candice Solie, Minnesota Chapter

It seems ironic that often the root of poor morale in a communications center is a lack of effective interpersonal communications. In fact, the majority of management experts agree most management problems are interpersonal communications problems. Verbal and nonverbal messages are sent, but what is sent is not always what is received. Somewhere between sender and receiver, some sort of static intervenes to distort the message. When interpersonal communications break down, so do relationships. When relationships break down, the results are stress, distrust and other symptoms of poor morale, such as tardiness, absenteeism and turnover.

Effective interpersonal communications requires an atmosphere of mutual respect and a desire for open, honest dialogue. A closed, non-supportive environment breaks down interpersonal communications. An open, supportive environment enhances interpersonal communications.

To facilitate an open, supportive environment, all members of the comm center team must use meaningful downward and upward communication. Both are equally important and dependent upon each other.

Downward communication involves providing clear instructions, directions, ideas and suggestions. Whenever possible the “why” behind decisions and actions should be explained clearly, so acceptance and understanding replace misunderstanding and resistance. When confronted with change, adults tend to believe they have a right to know the reason for the change. Studies have shown employees in today’s workforce want to be viewed as valued participants in the process, not just subservient receivers of orders.

Upward communications involves soliciting ideas, suggestions and comments from others. You can send a directive or other message, but unless you know the message was received, true communication does not occur. Soliciting feedback from others helps clear up confusion and enhances understanding and acceptance.

Soliciting Feedback

Feedback is solicited by using the basic techniques of active listening to get the message across. (For more on open-ended questions, paraphrasing and reflecting feelings, see last month’s CDE article.) Open-ended questions are questions that can’t be answered “yes” or “no,” but require the speaker to provide more information. Paraphrasing is a brief rephrasing of the information provided by the speaker. Paraphrasing assists the listener’s understanding and helps the speaker clarify main points and concerns. Reflecting feelings is repeating in a short declarative statement the emotions or feelings the speaker is communicating directly or indirectly. It is listening empathetically (not sympathetically) in an effort to determine where the speaker is coming from. It is important to remember that empathy and sympathy are not the same. Empathy is putting yourself in other people’s shoes to gain a sense of how they feel; sympathy is feeling sorry for another person. Paraphrasing and reflecting feelings are excellent techniques to clear up confusion and prevent potential communications breakdowns.

Delivering Feedback

How feedback is delivered also has an impact on the effectiveness of the communications cycle. For instance, simply complaining to others about “the way things are around here” offers no relief from the situation; it only serves to “stir the pot.” You get a stronger impact by logically explaining a perceived problem and recommending a solution. The feedback will be taken more seriously and interpersonal communications will flow more effectively if complaining is replaced by explaining and recommending, using the basic techniques of active listening.

Tone/Manner of Speech and Nonverbal Communications

Sometimes it's not what is said, but how it's said that sets the tone for interpersonal communications. The meaning of spoken words is affected by the tone/manner in which they are delivered. For instance, just by responding "hello" at the start of a conversation, you can convey either pleasure (happy, up-beat tone) or displeasure (flat, "oh no, it's you" tone – guaranteed to put a damper on the conversation).

Nonverbal communications or body language can convey subconscious messages and set a positive or negative tone for interpersonal communications. Because as much as 90 percent of communications is nonverbal, facial expressions, gestures or even something as subtle as seating arrangements can have an impact. In the latter instance, let's say a manager brings an employee into his office for a discussion. Placing the employee across the desk, face to face, conveys confrontation (best used for a "shape up or ship out" discussion). Angling the chairs to sit side by side conveys rapport (best used for a "let's get together and work things out" discussion). During the discussion, leaning forward, with hands open, conveys interest and careful listening. Leaning away with arms folded over the chest conveys disinterest or disagreement. The tone is set before a word has been said.

Some additional guaranteed communications breakers are sarcastic comments and incredulous responses (i.e., a quizzical look of disbelief and shock at the stupidity of what is being said). Both humiliate people and only damage relationships and stifle effective interpersonal communications. The next time a trainee seems reluctant to ask questions or a subordinate or coworker shuts down or reacts negatively during a discussion, ask yourself, "Could my actions or reactions be sending signals that I think their questions or opinions are stupid or baseless?" Remember, sometimes actions do speak louder than words.

Most management problems are interpersonal communications problems that can be solved by applying active listening techniques and remaining cognizant of tone/manner of speech and body language. When both the sender and receiver truly are listening, an atmosphere of mutual respect and a desire for open and honest dialogue is fostered. The static clears up – what is sent is what is received – and stress, distrust and other symptoms of poor morale are reduced greatly.

About the Author

Candice Solie is vice president of Profile Evaluations, Inc. (PEI). For the past 15 years, she has concentrated her efforts on the human-resource aspects of public safety communications. Solie serves on the APCO Project PRO committee and the Editorial Advisory Committee. You can reach her via e-mail at candi@pei-911.com.