



Assertive Communication and Active Listening

Communication is essential for almost everything we do. Effective communication skills are fundamental to success in many aspects of life, especially in our relationships with family, friends, community members, and co-workers. Many jobs require strong communication skills, and those who are effective at communicating are more likely to get hired, land promotions, avoid workplace conflict, and be more satisfied at work.

But what makes someone an effective communicator, and how can we ensure that our messages are clearly understood? This guide will help you understand the effectiveness of and how to use assertive communication and active listening when communicating in the workplace.



Communication is a two-way process. It involves both how we send and receive messages. Receiving includes how we take in the message (reading or listening, for example), and the 'decoding' of the message. Effective communication requires active listening from both parties involved to ensure that messages are clearly received and understood.

What is Communication?

Communication is the act of transferring information from one person, or group to another. Every act of communication involves (at least) one sender, a message, and a recipient. This may sound simple, but communication is actually a very complex subject.

When we think about what communication is, it is usually the words that we say and write that come to mind. Using words is a common way to express thoughts and feelings, but messages are received in more ways than the spoken word. Consider these numbers:

- **7%** of messages expressing feelings and emotions are communicated through the spoken word.
- **38%** are communicated through body language and tone of voice.
- **55%** are communicated through facial expression.

93% of communication is through body language and voice tone

The transfer of messages from sender to recipient is affected by many factors including our emotions, the cultural situation, the medium used to communicate, and even our location. We've all been in a situation when a friend or family member tells us they're "fine" but we know by their tone and body language that they are definitely not fine. This is an example of how non-verbal communication gives us more information than verbal communication.

In some situations, noise or activity can be distracting and may lead to shouting and misunderstanding. How a person feels affects how communication takes place. An angry person may communicate messages through their facial expressions and tones very differently than a person who is feeling sad, depressed, or disappointed. Some people are clear and precise when they communicate and others are very circular and may take a long time to get to the point. Additionally, where a person is seated in relation to another person, or if they are standing while others are sitting can influence how messages are given and received.

In sum, how our messages are received depends a lot more on non-verbal cues than on what we are actually saying.



Reflection Question: Who do you communicate with most often (your children, spouse, significant other, school personnel, people at work, etc.)? Do you communicate differently with these different people? If so, how?

Communication Styles

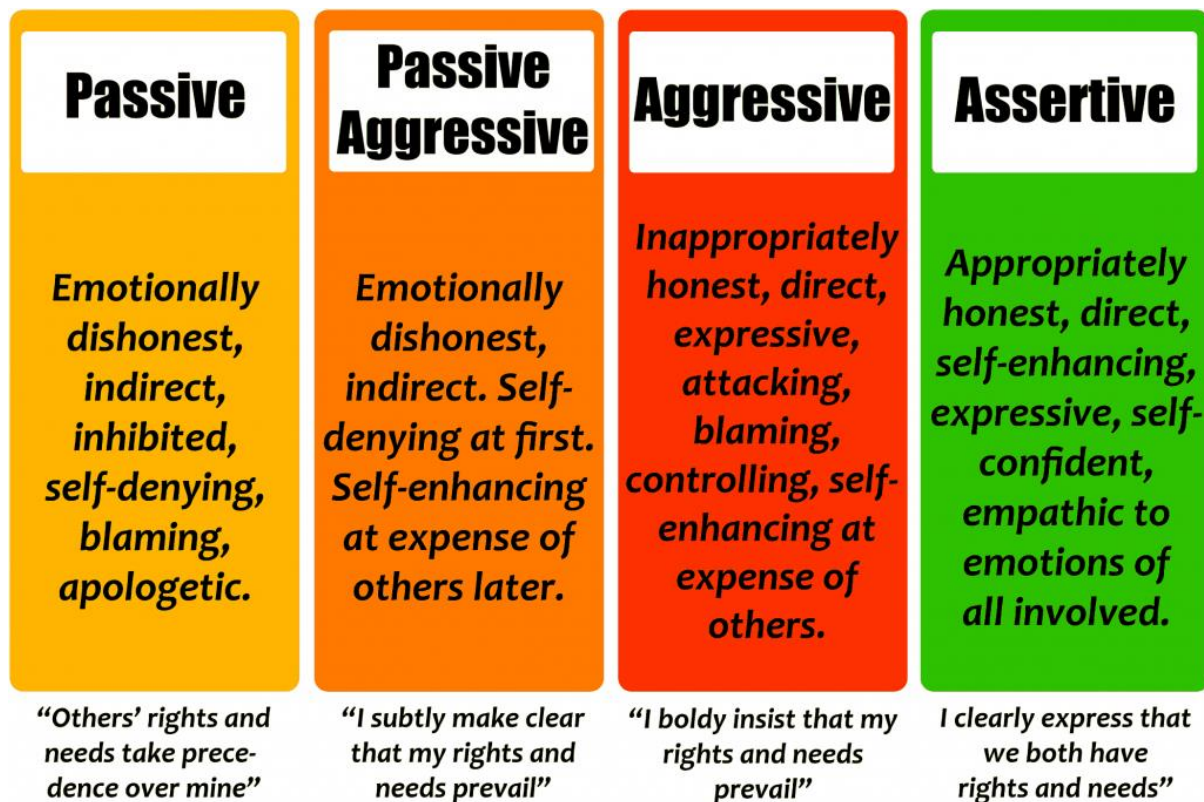
Why does communication seem to work beautifully at times and fail miserably at others? Communication styles are the broad ways in which people tend to communicate with others. There are four main communication styles: passive, passive-aggressive, aggressive, and assertive. When communication breaks down, it's often because the patterns and habits of how we communicate — our communication styles — get in the way.

Passive Communicators – People who speak in a passive manner have difficulty expressing themselves and tend to give in to others. Failure to express thoughts and emotions often leads to miscommunication and built-up anger or resentment.

Passive-Aggressive Communicators – Passive-aggressive communication seems passive on the surface but reveals a hidden resentment that comes through in subtle, indirect ways. You might recognize this style of communication in someone who uses frequent sarcasm, or uses phrases like "Fine, whatever."

Aggressive Communicators – Aggressive communication takes things to the other side of the spectrum. People who rely on this communication style in the workplace, at home, or among friends tend to dominate the conversation. They issue commands and ask questions rudely while failing to listen to others.

Assertive Communicators – The assertive style of communication offers an effective and healthy way to express yourself. It encourages open, honest dialogue while still considering the needs of others.



The first three communication styles can cause problems when trying to build relationships. Failing to listen to others (aggressive), shying away from conflict (passive-aggressive), or the fear of expressing ourselves (passive) prevents effective communication.

However, **assertive communication is direct, calm, clear, respectful, honest, tactful, and confident.** People who use assertive communication are more likely to get their needs met, avoid drama or stress, and have better relationships with friends and co-workers. On the job, assertive communication benefits both you and your co-workers. It involves taking responsibility for your own choices, addressing misunderstandings or confusion as soon as they come up, and finding compromises when necessary.

Activity 1 – What style of communication do you use?

Use the following checklist to assess your current style of communication. You may answer the questions reflecting on how you generally communicate, or on a particular exchange have had with someone.

Put a check mark next to any statement that is true for you more than 50% of the time.

Communication Style A

- ☐ Others choose for you and make decisions for you.
- ☐ You are inhibited, shy, self-conscious.
- ☐ If you get your own way, it is by chance.
- ☐ You feel anxious, ignored, helpless, manipulated, angry at yourself and/or others.
- ☐ You often overburden yourself and don't say "no" enough.
- ☐ You avoid confrontation at almost all costs.
- ☐ Your underlying belief is that you should never make someone uncomfortable or displeased except yourself.

Communication Style B

- ☐ You choose for others and make decisions for others.
- ☐ You are brutally honest.
- ☐ You are direct and forceful, at times blunt.
- ☐ You feel righteous, superior, controlling – later possibly feeling guilty.
- ☐ You lash out at others when you're upset or feeling unfairly treated.
- ☐ You have a difficult time admitting that you are wrong.
- ☐ Your underlying belief is that you must put others down to protect yourself.

Communication Style C

- ___ You manipulate others so that they will choose the way you want.
- ___ You tend toward indirectness with the impression of being direct.
- ___ In win-lose situations you will make the opponent look bad or manipulate so you win.
- ___ You often feel like you are the victim of circumstances around you.
- ___ You often open communications with "You make me..."
- ___ If you don't get your way, you'll make snide comments or pout.
- ___ Your underlying belief is that you need to fight to be heard and respected. If that means you need to manipulate, be passive or aggressive, so be it.

Communication Style D

- ___ You are sensitive and caring with your honesty.
- ___ You are respectfully direct.
- ___ You are willing to compromise and negotiate.
- ___ You feel confident, self-respecting, goal-oriented, valued. Later you may feel a sense of accomplishment.
- ___ You are able to refuse unreasonable requests made by your coworkers and supervisor.
- ___ You readily accept positive criticism and suggestions.
- ___ Your underlying belief is that you have a responsibility to protect your own rights. You respect others but not necessarily their behavior.

Add up the number of check marks for each section.

- Style A: Passive Communication _____
- Style B: Aggressive Communication _____
- Style C: Passive-Aggressive Communication _____
- Style D: Assertive Communication _____

Circle the highest number on your score sheet - this is your current predominate communication style. If there is a tie, then you may have two predominate styles.

Assertive Communication

Research has shown that the things we say to ourselves (our inner dialogue) have a profound impact on our feelings and actions. For a person to act in an assertive manner, they must believe the behavior is appropriate for themselves.

Fear and negative messages can take any number of forms.

- Fear of being aggressive
- Belief that one's own needs, wants, feelings or opinions are not as important
- Belief that it is not ok to say "no" to a request for help

Often individuals would like to behave more assertively or effectively but feel they can't. Their inability to act effectively is often the result of irrational beliefs. They believe that if they act in a particular way something terrible will happen and they will not be able to deal with the outcome. The fears and negative messages may take any number of forms. Some of the most common ones are:

- I must do everything within my power to help my friends/family members.
- I can't refuse any request for my time or resources.
- If I refuse to do any of these things, my friends will be angry or upset.
- I must not do anything that will upset another person.
- My needs are not as important as other people's.
- If I do anything that upsets another person, they won't like me.
- If someone becomes upset with me, I will be devastated, and it will be terrible.



To act **assertively**, a person must believe that being assertive is an appropriate behavior for them.

Activity 2 – How Assertive Am I?

How assertive am I?	<i>Almost never</i>	<i>Some of the time</i>	<i>Most of the time</i>
If I disagree with a friend, I say so, even if it means they might not like me.			
I ask for help when I am hurt or confused.			
I do what I think is right, even if I know it may make me unpopular.			
I let people know when they disappoint me.			
If a friend borrows money and is late paying it back, I remind him or her.			
I say no when a co-worker wants us to take a longer break or leave early.			
If a co-worker is being loud/disruptive, I ask them to be quiet/more respectful.			
If I have a co-worker who is always late, I tell him or her how I feel about it.			
I ask my friends for a favor when I need one.			
When someone asks me to do something that goes against my values, I refuse.			
I express my views on important things, even if others disagree.			
I don't put myself in danger of being harmed, even if my boss asks me to do a certain task.			
When I don't understand what someone is telling me, I ask questions.			
When it is clear that a point needs to be made and no one is making it, I say so.			
When people hurt my feelings, I let them know how I feel.			

How many times did you answer:

Most of the time? _____ *Some of the time?* _____ *Almost never?* _____

Reflection Questions:



- Which ways of being assertive do you feel most confident in? Do any come easy?
- Which ways seem the most challenging? Why?
- Pick the most challenging interaction from Activity 2. What are ways that you could communicate that need/opinion/feeling in your own words? What thoughts might help you be assertive in this situation?
- Were you surprised by any of the questions? Do they seem like examples of assertive communication to you? Why/why not?

Strategies for Assertive Communication

“I” Statements

“I” statements are the foundation of basic assertive communication. An “I” statement states your opinion, feeling, or need directly and simply. It can include an objective statement of how the other person’s communication style affects you. It does not evaluate the other person’s behavior or character. “I think that you are a jerk” is not a true “I” statement because it is a judgment of the other person’s character, not a statement of how their behavior affects the speaker. Examples of “I” statements are:

- I am really tired. I need 15 minutes of quiet to lie down.
- I feel angry when you don’t do the dishes as you agreed to do.

“I” statements, rather than “you” statements, focus on the feelings or beliefs of the speaker rather than thoughts and characteristics of the listener. For example, a person might say to his or her partner, “I feel abandoned and worried when you consistently come home late without calling” instead of demanding, “Why are you never home on time?”

4 Simple Steps of I-Statements

When you (describe the specific behavior) _____

I feel (describe how you feel) _____

because (what effect does this have on you?) _____

so, I want (what do you want?) _____

Practicing Assertive Communication

Learning to communicate assertively can take some practice, especially if you're normally a passive communicator. However, there are some simple steps and formulas you can use to communicate your thoughts directly and honestly to someone else. Here are some steps you can take to practice assertive communication in various scenarios.

Assertiveness Skill Steps

- Step 1: State Your Feeling
- Step 2: Describe the Behavior
- Step 3: State What You Want
- Step 4: Give Something Back

Saying No to Unwanted Pressure

- Step 1: Decide: Is the request reasonable?
- Step 2: Repeat and/or ask for more information.
- Step 3: Explain your reason.
- Step 4: Say no firmly and calmly.
- Step 5: Offer an alternative, if appropriate.

Defusing Anger

- Step 1: Acknowledge the other person's feelings.
- Step 2: Offer to discuss the issue at a later time.
- Step 3: When things are calm, prepare to resolve the issue.

Receiving Criticism

- Step 1: Defuse if necessary.
- Step 2: Listen closely to what is said.
- Step 3: Reflect to clarify information.
- Step 4: Correct any misunderstandings and/or apologize if appropriate.
- Step 5: Prepare steps to make things right.
- Step 6: Ask for a follow up evaluate progress.

Giving Criticism

- Step 1: Create clarity for yourself about the behavior that needs improvement.
- Step 2: Choose the time and place that you will talk with the person.
- Step 3: Describe the behavior or action that is bothersome. (When you...)
- Step 4: State how the behavior affects you. (I feel...)
- Step 5: State what you want the other person to do. (I would like you to...)
- Step 6: Give the other person something back. (Then I would...And you would...)
- Step 7: Give opportunity for response and reflection to ensure understanding.
- Step 8: Suggest a follow up evaluate progress.

Active Listening

We all tend to forget that communication is a two-way process. It involves both how we send and receive messages. We often fall into the trap of 'broadcasting', where we just issue a message and fail to listen to the response. Quite a lot of the time, we are not really listening to others in conversation, but thinking about what we plan to say next.

Improving your listening skills is likely to pay off in improvements in your relationships both at work and at home. When people listen to others by giving them their full attention, they let them know they care about what is being said or communicated. By concentrating closely on what is being said, it is easier to gain an understanding of what a person is trying to communicate.

We communicate the fact that we are listening through both verbal and nonverbal cues. Some of these cues include making eye contact, repeating some points to make certain you understand, not interrupting, getting on the same level, and asking appropriate questions. Giving these cues encourages the speaker to continue and to perhaps tell you more.

Research shows that we spend about 40-45% of our waking hours listening, but only at 25% efficiency. What can poor listening lead to in the workplace?

- Miscommunication
- Errors
- Lower productivity and morale
- Lost customers
- Increased turnover

Levels of Listening

What IS "listening?" Listening is not the same as hearing.

Learning to listen means not only paying attention to the words being spoken but also how they are being spoken and the non-verbal messages sent with them. It means giving your full attention to the person speaking and genuinely concentrating on what they are saying—and what they are not saying.

Often listening is described at three different levels – hearing, passive listening, and active listening:

- **Hearing** – the lowest level of listening. You understand what is being said, but do not react to it. This might be described as half-listening. An example would be when your child tells you something when you are busy, and you nod your head or say okay but haven't really heard what they say.
- **Passive Listening** – the second level of listening. This represents when you may be more aware of the meaning of what's being said, but you choose not to respond so some information could be lost or misinterpreted.
- **Active Listening** – the highest level of listening. At this level the receiver of the message is attentive to the sender and processes the message thoroughly by relating it to experiences, ideas, and feelings behind the message.

**We can use verbal and non-verbal cues to help people know that we are actively listening.
We can show others we are actively listening in the following ways:**

Verbal

- Letting the person finish, not interrupting
- Repeating or paraphrasing some of the points
- Reflecting back what you understand them to be saying
- Asking questions

Non-Verbal

- Making eye contact
- Smiling
- Nodding
- Paying attention and not looking distracted



Reflection Question: How can active listening benefit you at work? What about among your family members and/or friends?

Listening with Care

One of the best ways to show we care for another person is through active listening. It does not mean that you have to agree. We may not like what the other person is saying, but if we are a good listener, we will try to understand and identify the other person's message.

Active listening gives our friends, family, and colleagues a space to express, share, and maybe reorganize their thoughts and emotions. We usually underestimate just how much we can do for others by listening to them.

The validation we give to others by listening shows that they mean something to us, and that their story means something to us. In turn, they are able to gain some clarity by sharing their thoughts with someone who is listening.

Conclusion

Communication is the basis for all human interactions. Communication skills are a major factor in job success. These skills help us understand one another and get messages across to others.

Communication is a two-way process (it involves a sender and receiver), and it can be verbal or non-verbal. Assertive communication offers an effective and healthy way to express yourself. It encourages open, honest dialogue while still considering the needs of others.

Being assertive means that your statements:

- Are direct and to the point
- Are firm but not hostile
- Show respect for the other person
- Are clear about your goals
- May include an explanation, but not excuses
- Do not sound sarcastic, pleading or whining
- Do not blame others for your own feelings

Listening is also key to all effective communication. Active listening helps reduce misunderstandings by giving full attention to the speaker and providing appropriate verbal and non-verbal cues so that the message is clearly understood.