

# HR Fact Finder

Information and how-tos for managing human resources

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## Effective Communication Builds Effective Employees

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The act of communicating is so basic and so fundamental that most people don't think much about it. It happens all day, every day and in every corner of the globe. It happens using the telephone, the fax machine and the computer. Thanks to modern satellite technology, it can even happen between two people standing on opposite poles of the earth. In virtually every way that matters, it could be argued that the world today is built to support communication.

While communication mediums have become increasingly faster and more convenient, the fundamental goals of communication haven't changed. This is particularly true in business. Whether communication takes place between employees and managers, employees and customers or managers and executives, effectiveness is as much of a necessity as ever. Why? Because effective communication minimizes conflicts, increases efficiency and generally enables a company to run more smoothly. On the other hand, if a company's employees lack communication skills, the company's ability to work as a team is significantly impeded. When this happens, the company will falter and ultimately fail.

### The Need for Clarity

Clarity is the essential component of effective communication. After all, if the message isn't clear, it can't be understood. Most communication falls into one of the following categories, each with varying degrees of clarity:

**1. Assertive** – Assertive communication is the most clear and most desirable because it speaks from the heart. It means what it says and says what it means, with no room for ambiguity or misunderstanding. For example, calmly informing a colleague that you only have 30 minutes for a meeting is assertive. It clearly relays information and sets definite time parameters.

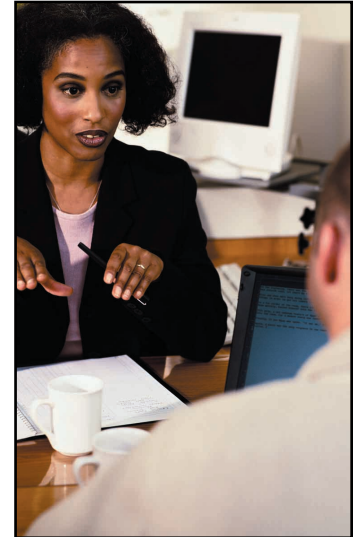
**2. Aggressive** – Aggressive communication is somewhat less clear because it is emotionally charged and often irrational. In the context of the previous example, aggressive communication would be failing to inform the colleague of the time constraint and then becoming upset and blaming the individual when the meeting runs longer than 30 minutes. Rather than laying out information calmly and clearly, aggressive communication blurs it out in an emotional, reactive way.

**3. Non-Assertive** – Non-assertive communication is the least clear because it is quiet and passive. In the beginning, it's not as damaging as aggressive communication, but it definitely has the potential to evolve into aggressive communication down the road. For example, if a manager habitually yells or acts abusively toward a particular employee, that employee probably won't like it, but he/she may decide just to accept the behavior and deal with it quietly. However, six months later that same manager may behave the same way under different circumstances (for example, after the employee has already had a really bad day), and the employee may decide not to be as quiet. In fact, the employee may start yelling, quit or even throw something across the room. In any event, the conflict could have been prevented if the employee had simply gone to the manager at the beginning and shared his or her thoughts about the manager's communication style and behavior.

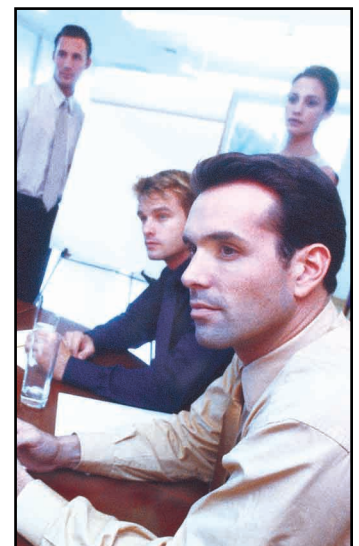
### Questions Are Critical

Communication is often unclear and ineffective because of a simple lack of information. People just don't bother to get the information they need. Some may ask the right questions but don't listen to the answers well enough to retain the information they need. Others ask the wrong questions or ask no questions. These scenarios breed misunderstanding.

Why do people go without information? The reasons are varied. For many people, asking questions is perceived to be a sign of ignorance or stupidity – they hesitate to ask questions due to fear of embarrassment. For others, supervisors may be the culprits. For example, if the supervisor happens to be a high-power, low-patience individual, the employee may just be too intimidated to ask the questions they need to ask in order to complete a particular task. While it feels more comfortable at the time, this lack of questioning is sure to leave certain matters unclear, and assumptions are made to compensate. When those assumptions later turn out to be false or incorrect (as they often are), supervisors get angry because the job hasn't been done to their satisfaction. Asking questions up front ensures that both parties are on the same page and allows communication to proceed more smoothly.



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## The Role of Listening

In addition to lack of sufficient information, communication can also break down due to inadequate listening skills. After all, communication is a two-way street. When one or both parties stop listening, true communication can't take place. This breakdown is usually due to one or more "fatal listening flaws" – mistakes that are usually made unintentionally, but that still serve to undermine the communication process. These mistakes include:

**1. Giving advice** – Doling out advice is a natural human tendency. Unfortunately, it's not always necessary or appropriate. Example: An employee comes to a colleague to tell him about an unfair performance review he just received. The colleague immediately launches into a diatribe about what the individual should do to remedy the situation. This isn't listening. In fact, when relating stories, events or circumstances, some people just want to be acknowledged and heard. They don't want advice. If advice isn't what the person wants, the communication process may shut down entirely.

**2. Defensiveness** – Becoming defensive is also a natural human tendency, but one which serves as a barrier to both listening and communication. By assuming a defensive posture, listening becomes almost impossible because one side of the exchange is effectively closed off. Defensiveness is a common problem when the exchange involves any kind of criticism. Even if the criticism is fair or honest, the employee may feel threatened by it and respond defensively.

**3. One-upmanship** – Another way to undermine the listening/communication process is to constantly "one-up" what the other person is saying. In the context of the performance review example, this might mean making a comment such as, "Oh, you think your review was unfair? Wait till you hear what happened to me!" This kind of response isn't listening. It's self-centered, interrupting and trying to take control of the situation.

**4. Telling others how to feel** – Effective listening implies an ability to understand and appreciate what other people are feeling. On the other hand, telling other people how to feel ("Oh, don't worry about that, it's just a single review.") discounts and nullifies their feelings. It makes them wrong for feeling the way they do and quickly closes whatever channel of communication might have been open.

### Making Communication Skills a Priority

While communication is one of the most basic human activities, its importance within the business environment is all too often underestimated. Effective communication doesn't begin and end with the ability to relay correct information. It also includes the ability to listen, act assertively and ask questions when appropriate. Whatever their titles and positions may be, employees who master these skills will perform better and ultimately become a more valuable part of the team.



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