

Good relationships among members of a business or team are critical for success. Poor communications starve a relationship while good communications nourish it. This is true regardless of whether you are a member of a committee looking at starting a business, a member of a team operating a business, or part of a family farm business. Improving communication skills is important for success. But this doesn't just happen. Both the receiver and the sender must work at developing verbal and listening skills.

Improving Discussions

Do not allow ridicule, punishment, or lecturing in discussions. Encourage listening, understanding, finding alternatives, commitment to action, and support for one another. Listen not only to what the other person is saying, but also to what the person is feeling. Being respectful to all involved is important at all times.

For example, let's examine a typical harvest discussion. It is the middle of harvest, and the combine has broken down. Jack scrambles to find out what has gone wrong. After he identifies what has broken, he calls his wife, Carol, to go to the dealership and buy the needed parts. Carol drops what she is doing and heads for the car to make a fast trip to town. Within the hour she is in the field, parked next to the combine. She hands him the boxes with the parts in them. Upon opening the boxes he stops for a moment, looks at the parts, and snaps, "You got the wrong parts. How could you have done something so stupid?"

Carol feels hurt by Jack's response. Her natural reaction is to respond to his anger with her own anger. She responds, "These are the parts that you told me to get. You must have told me the wrong thing." From here on, the conversation focuses on who was to blame, rather than how to solve the situation.

Attack, Counterattack, Withdraw

When we are under pressure we become frustrated and may verbally attack the behavior of someone we work with. The other person feels hurt by our comments and counterattacks. This system of attack and counterattack continues until someone withdraws from the conversation.

Instead of counterattacking, the other person may hold their feelings and the situation will not escalate. However, the other person will harbor these feelings and the emotions may be vented later.

Continuing the example, Jack is angry because these are the wrong parts. He feels a need to vent his anger, so he attacks Carol. He accuses her of making a mistake (although it could have been his mistake or the dealership's mistake). She feels hurt by his comments, so she counterattacks. This series of counterattacks continues until one of the parties withdraws from the conversation. The next time he calls on her to do an errand, a very tense situation may arise.

Holding our feelings

Instead of counterattacking, Carol could have held her feelings in when Jack attacked her. In this case, the situation would not have escalated. But Carol would harbor these feelings until they were vented later.

Sharing our Feelings

Instead of attacking and judging the other person's behavior, we could have shared our feelings about our frustrations. This will tend to bring us together rather than drive us apart. Making judgments tends to isolate us.

Jack made a judgment that Carol had gotten the wrong parts, and Carol felt attacked and isolated. But sharing our feelings helps to connect us. If Jack would have responded, "these are the wrong parts. I am upset because we are wasting a good harvesting day. Could you go back to town?" Knowing how Jack felt, Carol would probably have rushed back to town.

Making Judgments versus Sharing Emotions

Judgments and emotions are different. Judgmental statements are "*I am right, you are wrong.*" Statements of emotions are "*I am angry, I am afraid and I am worried.*" Judgments are often the result of how we feel. It is often an expression of our feelings.

Judgments are much more likely to be heard as criticisms than are feelings. If I say, "*You are wrong,*" you are likely to feel criticized and attacked. As soon as we feel criticized, it is hard to hear anything else that is said. Our mind is consumed by the criticism.

However, if I say, "*I am angry,*" you are less likely to feel attacked. This is because expressions of emotion (how we feel) are true statements. If I say that "*you are wrong,*" you will probably disagree. But if I say that "*I am angry,*" no one can argue.

Although expressing our feelings seems to make us vulnerable, they really make us safer. If we make a judgment and attack the other person, we are isolating them and inviting them to counterattack. However, if we share how we feel, we are exposing ourselves to the other person. This makes it easier for the other person to respond in kind. Both people feel safer.

Ideas versus Feelings

Communicating ideas brings our minds together. But communicating emotions brings us together as individuals. It is assumed that we should share ideas but keep our feelings to ourselves. This is part of the culture of rural communities. However, emotions are very powerful and cannot be ignored. Feelings are more important than ideas at influencing our behavior and decisions.

Keys to Effective Communication

Below are keys to effective communications. But just reading these points will not improve your communication skills. You must practice them. Practice them until they become habits.

- **Give your attention** - When someone starts to talk to you, stop what you are doing and thinking. Face the person and devote your whole attention to what and how it is being said.
 - **Listen, not just hear** - One of the keys to good communication is the willingness to listen for meaning in what the other person says and not just for the words. Watch facial expressions and body language.
 - **Don't let your mind wander** - While the person is talking, do not think about your answer or response. Listen until the person is finished, then decide what you are going to say.
 - **Check for accuracy and understanding** - When the person is finished talking, paraphrase back to the person what was said to you. If you heard right, then respond to that statement or question.
 - **Be aware of other's needs** - You need to be aware of the needs of the other business associates, team, or family members. Each person has different needs that should be considered and respected. Although each of us has differing needs, all of us have a need for trust, responsibility, praise, security, sense of belonging, and recognition.
 - **Ask, don't tell** - demonstrate equality - Do this by asking for advice or asking a person to do something. This shows you respect the other person as a peer or equal. Telling often implies a superior/subordinate relationship, such as boss vs. employee.
 - **Keep an open mind** - Do not criticize, pass judgment, or preach. It is extremely important to learn to make objective evaluations about ideas, people, and situations. You are making a value judgment when you attach your values, beliefs, or needs to an appraisal.
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- **Offer advice, don't give advice** - Learn to offer in-sights, advice, and expertise without being forceful. It is wrong to say "*this is how you should handle it*" or "*this is what you should do.*" It is better to say "*what do you think about this way,*" or "*I suggest we...*" However, sometimes it is not appropriate to even soft-pedal advice. You should offer it only if asked for.
- **Develop trust** - Trust is the product of open and honest communications. So it is important that good communication channels exist. Also, trust is an essential ingredient of teamwork. If trust exists, teamwork and cooperation are much easier to achieve.
- **Create feelings of equity** - People share a sense of equality if all parties are informed, trust exists, and work is based on cooperation. For business ventures, such as two-generation farm arrangements to succeed, all the parties must feel that they are equals. If one party feels left out or feels like a subordinate, success becomes less likely.
- **Develop comfortable relations** - Tension and stress are normal in any relationship. However, the level of tension and stress can be reduced in businesses that develop teamwork and trust through open and honest communication.
- **Become genuinely interested in others** - All of us have a need to feel important and be understood. One of the ways we feel important is if others are interested in us. So talk in terms of the other persons' interests and try to understand another point of view. If we expect others to understand us, we must first understand them.
- **Motivate others** - There are several ways to motivate people. Both negative and positive reinforcement are effective. But in the long run, negative reinforcement like criticism or punishment often creates a desire for revenge. Too often we think of positive reinforcement as receiving more income, but other positive reinforcements that require little effort are praise, trust, interest, and recognition.
- **Keep a sense of humor** - Laugh at the goofy things that happen. Laugh off little annoyances. Smile at every opportunity. Seeing the humor in a situation can often defuse it.