

Effective Communication

Using Psychological Principles



Azimuth

Observation > Judgement

This is a key part of some treatment modalities like Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and Mindfulness/Meditation. Always fact finding via observations and questions with your logical brain, trying to keep emotions and automatic thoughts/judgements at bay.

In general, judgement doesn't always interfere negatively. It exists to help us as a cognitive heuristic so we don't have to spend time assessing every detail of a situation on a day to day basis.

Where it doesn't help us is when it contributes to incorrect assumptions. This happens when we don't gather the data necessary to correctly make a good heuristic. We make a quick automatic judgement about them and respond accordingly, they have a bad reaction, and we don't understand why. And the why is really because your assessment wasn't based in facts.

Fact Finding for Accurate Observations

Who is this person, what are their buttons. To the extent appropriate, find out as much as possible about the person. Does this person hate conflict, does this person love horses, do they have kids, do they ski, etc. Details here matter. The more you can know about someone, no matter how quirky, weird, or seemingly irrelevant, the better. It's never totally irrelevant.

Why are they do they behave like they do? How might they be feeling? Personal reasons or environmental factors that provide context. Especially relevant for people who might be more challenging to talk to, because if they're difficult there may be a really good reason why if you dig a little further. E.g., is their rigidity actually anxiety?

Motivational Interviewing

A method that helps people resolve ambivalent feelings and insecurities to find the internal motivation they need to change their behavior. This is done by getting to know the person, and being curious about how their behavior is incongruent with their values.

Validation & "The Compliment Sandwich"

In order for this to be successful, the "compliments" must be genuine and extremely relevant to the criticism. Most people are not all bad and with some thought, it is possible to find something you do appreciate or admire about the person.

Concrete Techniques

Additional ways to make your communication more effective and smooth, people less defensive, and to build trust and to gain more factual information

Mirroring. People want to be heard. By paraphrasing what you think you are hearing them say, they will be less likely to become defensive and will also have the opportunity to clarify what they meant if you repeat it incorrectly, which can avoid escalation.

Set expectations. If you feel that information or your role in relation to them is going to be a surprise, set out what is going to happen at the beginning.

Owning what is yours. Taking responsibility for what you have done wrong or mistakes you've made is hugely helpful. It shows the other person you're willing to acknowledge and change what they don't like, which makes it more likely for them to do the same.

Honesty. Telling the truth can help reduce pent up feelings of resentment or anger and can also lead to more effective problem solving.

Share. The more you share, the more likely it is that the other party will too. People don't share information if they feel vulnerable, so showing them that it's a safe place to share will help with this.

Facts. Using facts to navigate disputes works because then no one feels like they have "lost" and the points being made can be argued.

Take time to find the right time. If you don't feel like you're in a good place to resolve a conflict or talk about something effectively, don't. Take time to cool off, think about things, and then come back to the conversation.

Talk face to face. From a communication perspective, technology is terrible. People project their own feelings into the tone of emails and texts. Phone is better, but face to face is always best. You can read non-verbal cues and tone which help you understand what's going on with the person, and you can also more accurately express how you feel.

Calmness. Your calmness is contagious. Help keep emotions down, present information in a neutral way.

Body Language. Signals a lot, be sure you don't look angry or closed off.

Have a plan. Prepare for as many scenarios as you can. This will help you come up with effective ways to deliver information as well as keep your affect down in the moment.

Explain. People are more likely to hear you and accept what you're saying if you explain the rationale behind it.

Tolerate the other person's weaknesses. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and it can annoy you. But if you can tolerate them and look past anything that is interfering, it will help focus on what they can do well, and will remind you that they aren't all bad.

Humor. In most environments, a little humor goes a long way. It relaxes people and lets them know you're accessible and a human too.

Make it a very specific request, not a vague demand. Demands make people defensive because they will feel you're taking away their autonomy in a large domain. Instead, be clear to request specifically what you would like. E.g., not "I wish you'd stop being so rude", but "I would like you to speak to your peers with more patience and a more even tone". Specific requests are also measurable, which is important for performance review.

Neutral Ways to Ask "Clarifying Questions"

"I'm wondering if there might be another way to go about completing this project that would save us time and money"

"Tell me about how you came to this conclusion"

"Wait, I'm confused why our budget for the party planning committee would be \$70"

"I'd love your thoughts on our new HR system"

"I appreciate that it took you so long to figure this out for us, I'm sorry that we might have to make a few changes"

"How are you feeling about our vacation policy, is it working for you?"

"Let's collaborate and deal with this issue together".

"My intention was not to make you upset, it didn't occur to me that by doing this, you might be angry with me".

"I know you didn't mean to, but the way you acted at the party made me feel really unimportant"

"I feel annoyed about having to do this, can we talk about it?"