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PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In the previous lesson you have learnt about entrepreneurship skills. You have already learnt that communication skill is also an important skill needed to be an entrepreneur. Communication happens when two or more people interact and share their thoughts, feelings, viewpoints and messages. It is a process where human beings elaborate their social skills by transmitting and receiving information with one another. In professional setup it is very important to develop some guidelines and best practices for appropriate communication between different stakeholders or clients. If a common goal or an objective has not been set up, it becomes very complex to achieve it unless people openly share thoughts, ideas and information within a communication skill framework. This lesson has been specifically designed to provide some guidelines and best practices to improve the communication skills within an organization.



OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- build awareness about various types of interpersonal communication in professional setups;
- develop effective communication skills;
- discuss assertion skill, listening skill and conflict resolution skills in office environments;
- improve communication skills;
- make requests and give directions in professional environment.

29.1 COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Throughout the professional life one faces complex and sometimes tough engaging situations with superiors, subordinates, and peers. Communicating with various stakeholders is very crucial in all organizations. In addition to other forms of communication activities such as writing a letter or preparing a formal presentation, interpersonal communication is a day-in day-out activity which we all engage in everyday life.

Interpersonal communication is unavoidable and can not be escaped; abilities in this domain are of extreme importance in professional organizations. Communication skills have always ranked among the topmost skills desired by prospective employers. They are of crucial importance within the organization and many a times people have been separated from the job because of poor interpersonal communication skills.

Communication skills are an important aspect of interpersonal skills. It encompasses verbal as well as non-verbal cues and interactions in one-on-one or among members of a small group. People with good interpersonal skills can easily relate to and work with diverse set of people within the organization. They can easily negotiate the differences, disputes and can handle conflicts. They can make required requests easily, receive information and work effectively and efficiently. Generally a person with good communication skills will be open to wide variety of ideas and is always willing to put forth his or her viewpoint in order to solve problems in the organization.

Skills that are critical for effective communication are:

- **Assertion skills.** These include verbal and non-verbal behavior and enable us to maintain respect, satisfy our needs, and defend our rights without dominating, manipulating, abusing, or controlling others.
- **Listening skills.** These skills enable us to understand other people's point of view. These include new ways of responding so that the other person feels that his/her point of view has been appreciated and respected.
- **Conflict-resolution skills.** Conflict resolution skills are very important in organization setups. These skills are critical because conflicts do happen in organizations on a regular basis and these skills are very helpful in effective resolution of such conflicts.

Let us learn these skills in detail.



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29.1.1 Assertion Skills

The communication skill of assertion is related to high self-esteem, confidence and an acceptance of yourself and your abilities. Assertive communication skill emphasizes the rights of the individual as well as the rights of the other people. In specific situations and when there is a need, an assertive person can disagree, stand up for his/her own rights and present alternative points of view. He or she does this without being fearful but at the same time without being intimidating or putting the other person down. In contrast, a person who feels threatened in such situations behaves with aggressive or non-assertive responses. He/she will either start shouting or will intimidate other person or will just be cowed down and not speak anything.

The aggressive or non-assertive behavior comes from feelings of low self-esteem or low self confidence in one's abilities. Unfamiliar domains, lack of knowledge in the subject or general personality trait makes one feel threatened. So in situations of disagreements, the person behaves either with aggression and anger or just becomes too submissive and passive about the ongoing activities. An aggressive person tries to dominate and humiliate others just to prove the point that a better solution is not acceptable as it is not what he or she suggested. On the other hand, the subdued person will simply not assert himself or herself and will follow the orders even if he or she personally feel bad about it. When unpleasant situations arise, a submissive person tends to avoid these.

So contrary to popular perception, in communication skills, assertiveness is not a way to force your point of view. Instead, it only means that you are in control of your own decisions and behaviors. The assertive style also involves respecting the same control of feelings for people in front of you and gives space to counter view-points irrespective of whether one agrees to those viewpoints or not. Persons with good assertive communication skills easily handle co-workers without being aggressive by recognizing the rights of colleagues and co-workers. They do not try to manipulate the things and understand the right of others to have their own viewpoints. An assertive person is comfortable in negotiations and does compromise wherever required without feeling let down or uncomfortable.

Assertive communication skill shows expressions, inner feelings and openness about yourself and your co-workers. Let's look at some common workplace examples wherein the communicator is quite aggressive:

“You have prepared a poor report. Go and work again.”

“You are so stupid, can’t handle this simple task. It is end of week and delivery time is right here”

“How many times do I need to tell you the same thing? Can’t you do it correctly in the first go.”

Statements like above are called finger pointing “you” statements, these are directed to intimidate and put down a co-worker. On the contrary, assertive communication skills require you to be more subtle about such situations:

“I am afraid this report might not be acceptable. Please work a little bit more on this.”

“I was under impression that this task is simpler. Let’s make our full effort to complete this task as we have reached the delivery date.”

“I am bit concerned about the mistakes being repeated more than once. Let’s develop a best practice and put in our best effort to capture all the mistakes in the first go itself.”

Using assertive style shows that one can easily put forward his or her point of view in a non-judgmental way and without denigrating the other person. Such style shows compassion and also lets the other person know how their performance and behavior has been perceived.

Assertive communication style involves:

- Being non-judgmental about the behavior of person one is interacting with.
- Being able to disclose one’s own feeling without feeling fearful or threatened.
- Being able to convey the importance of outcomes from other person’s behavior.

The fundamental principle is that one should focus on behavior description without drawing inferences about the motives, character or attitude of the person. It should be objective, brief and to the point. A concrete and observed outcome should be explicitly told to the other person outlining the negative or positive results from his or her behavior or actions.

The assertion skills play an important role in various types of interactions that happen in organizational set-ups. We will elaborate some of these interactions and how assertive communication skills play a role in each one of these.

A. Providing Feedback

Feedbacks are often sought in organization setups. Feedbacks are essential for efficient execution of various tasks and projects. Providing feedbacks is a tricky



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task because many times we are unaware about how the person (to whom we are providing the feedback) will react and respond. But effective feedback mechanism is crucial for effective communication in the organization. Both providing and receiving feedback in a cordial way is important to build trust and develop relationship among employees. It creates a positive atmosphere within the group, encourages communication and gels the unit together. A group where feedbacks are not encouraged is devoid of ideas and becomes obsolete in the long run.

During communication wherein feedback is being given or received, one should be open to ideas, should show interest in the other person by both verbal and non-verbal signs. One should encourage open flow of ideas and must try to understand the point of view of other person. It is a good idea to interject the person providing the feedback with statements which emphasize the feedback of other person like: *What I understand you are pointing out is....Or Please tell me more about this particular aspect....etc.*

While providing feedback, be specific as far as possible. Also try to gauge an appropriate time to provide feedback. Suggestions and feedback are more likely to be accepted if the other person is not in a defensive framework of mind. Be careful to provide feedback which is within the capabilities of the receiver and can be handled by him or her. One should always avoid bringing up past occurrences of negative behavior. Also always be open to receive the response after you have provided the feedback. Try to acknowledge the response; many times it can point to something wherein the change needs to be made by the person providing the feedback.

Feedback communication within an organization can be of the following types:

- Negative in nature
- Positive feedback from managers or seniors
- Positive feedback from colleagues
- Self-appraisal

In general, negative feedback is not always harmful. It can lead to positive efficient changes in the receiver if it has been delivered in an appropriate way. Positive feedback mostly encourages positive role and contribution from employees and motivates them to perform better. Self-appraisal is also a form of feedback wherein the person evaluates his or her performance and discusses it with colleagues or seniors.

So a good feedback mechanism within an organization improves the performance of employees, develops trust and bonhomie among the stakeholders. In an organization, most of such communication happens in front of each other. So it is an important skill which employees should strive hard for. Also it is important to match your body language and actions with the assertive feedback communication style.

B. Constructive Criticism

In our day-to-day life, we all come across criticism in one form or the other. We criticize others at times and on other occasions we get criticized by others. It is an important communication skill to impart constructive criticism. Equally important is to accept criticism without being too defensive or aggressive. Some of the suggestions and acceptable ways in a conversation involving criticism are as follows:

- Ensure that you are the authorized person or stakeholder to critique the person or the work. If you are not, there will be resentment.
- Try to convey one complaint at a time. Too many complaints, too much criticism at once is counterproductive.
- Always check the facts before jumping the gun. False complaint leads to arguments and distracts the conversation and fails to achieve the desired goal.
- Always make sure that criticism happens face-to-face and in private. Even well intentioned criticism is received with a bit of embarrassment. Make sure that the receiver does not feel too harassed, intimidated or dejected by using encouraging verbal and nonverbal signs. Constructive criticism is meant to improve the outcomes and should always be done objectively without any prejudices.
- Constructive criticism should be clear and specific and must put forth the improvement aspect so that the receiver does not feel offended.
- Always ensure that if a particular aspect has been criticized, the overall perception and appraisal of the person does not get affected because of such things.
- Wherever possible accept the partial responsibility for the issue or problem. Statements like *“Probably I failed to give clear instructions in the beginning...”* etc., will help balance the discussion.
- Make sure that accusatory verbal and non-verbal signals are not projected during such meeting. Avoid finger pointing gestures, rude language or high pitched tone. Converse normally and put forth the criticism in a decent manner.



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In the end it is important that the receiver is given sufficient time to put forth his/her point of view and to respond appropriately if he or she finds some criticism objectionable. This always has emotionally soothing result. Ensure that some quiet moments are tolerated and once the receiver speaks, he or she is heard patiently and compassionately.

C. Requests and Directions

Requests and providing directions to colleagues, superiors or juniors is part of everyday activity in an organizational setup. Every new employee must learn this form of communication skill. It is very useful as a new employee needs to make requests to varied people within the organization to understand the setup, to comprehend his or her role in the organization to collaborate and coordinate with different departments like HR, Finance, his or her own team, training coordinator etc. Everyone has lots of questions when he or she joins an organization. This is required to learn the things on the job and to find his/her way around. Settling into a new role takes a physical and mental toll and it is easy if one has right set of communication skills. It makes the task much more easy.

Many a times, due to our inherent nature, we are reluctant to ask for information. Sometimes we feel that asking such questions might make us appear a bit silly. We sometimes feel helpless. But if the request for information has been done in a proper and pleasing way, it will lead to getting the required information and projecting a good positive image about your enthusiasm and mannerism. You will be able to make new friends and will be able to enjoy the workplace like you enjoy the company of your friends.

So what are the qualities of good assertive communication skills for making requests? Make sure that your query is specific and appropriate. Ensure that you are asking for information to the right person. In case of doubts, always ask first like “*can you please let me know the way to the finance department*”. Once there, you can ask your queries like “*please let me know where to assign my tax saving investments on the HR tool?*” etc. Note that after making the initial honest effort on your own, it is always good for an employee to ask for help from others. In general, people will be ready to help and cooperate if the sought after help is in their purview and the request has come in a polite manner.

Similarly giving directions and directives to other teams, your team members, other stakeholders or even to colleagues or superiors is sometimes necessary and required by the work flow demands of the job. So, both these communication skills of requesting and giving directions are crucial for organizational strategies and to achieve the set goals. The table 29.1 shows some of the requests and directives. The difference can be seen.

Table 29.1: Difference between request and directive

Requests	Directives
“Please let me know the way to the finance department?”	“Ensure that you communicate this data to the finance department.”
“Can we meet in the afternoon?”	“See me in my room at 3.30.”
“Where shall I submit this expenditure claim form?”	“Give this form to HR team”
“Is there any way we can finish this committed task today?”	“I am expecting the project completion report today.”

Making requests create a supportive positive environment and gives people a sense of control in carrying out their tasks and responsibilities. Those who carry out requests are likely to have a better attitude and to perform their duties in a more effective manner than those who are expected to obey directives. But, in situations that call for specific action, directives may be more appropriate than requests (for instance, when there is danger).

It is possible to give directives in a positive way that does not assume a power imbalance. You can do this by explaining the reason for the directive. Do not simply make a demand without telling co-workers why they should do what you say. Indeed, if you give a directive, you should have an important reason for doing so and be willing to explain it to others. They are much more likely to cooperate when they see the need for such action. The directives in the table above can be rephrased like this:

Table 29.2: Directives (rephrased)

Original Version	Rephrased Version
“Ensure that you communicate this data to the finance department.”	“Be sure you get in touch with the finance department with this data. They are expecting this data for monthly revenue number generation.”
“See me in my room at 3.30.”	“See me at 3.30. We need to discuss the details and status of ongoing projects.”
“Give this form to HR team”	“Give the form to HR team. I am stuck in a meeting and have a short break now.”
“I am expecting the project completion report today.”	“I need the report today because it is important that we stay on schedule.”

Although we have suggested, in the preceding sections, various techniques for improved communication with others, ultimately there is no magic wand to



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improve it. Sometimes what works in one scenario might not work in other. Most of these interactions happen face-to-face with human beings and not with robots. There are personal choices, quirkiness, egos, sensibilities etc. In general the guidelines provided here will be fruitful but one needs to adapt it to different situations so that work is carried out efficiently and effectively. Awareness of the scenario and the environment is critical. We need to be calm, polite, respectful to others but positively assertive in our communication style.

29.1.2 Listening Skills

Given that we have been listening right from our birth, it might seem that we are good at it. The truth is many studies have revealed that the majority of us are not good listeners. We retain only 25-50% of information just after we get involved in a conversation with others. We all encounter situations wherein we are talking and we can sense that the person to whom we are talking to is lost in his/her own thoughts and is not paying any attention to what we are saying. Same is the case with body language which gives out clear signal if we are really interested in or listening in to the other person.

Some key aspects of good listening skill are:

- **Pay Attention:** Try to give full attention to the speaker especially in situations where you are engaged in one-to-one face-to-face conversation. Try to have regular eye contact with the speaker. Put aside your roaming thoughts. Avoid being mentally challenging the thoughts of the speaker. Also look out for and encourage positive body language signs from the speaker.
- **Appropriate Body Language:** Use facial expressions, smile, and nod occasionally. Try to adopt an open and inviting posture and encourage the speaker with occasional interjections and words like, *right, huh, correct, yeah, yes*.
- **Provide Feedback:** Many times, our prejudices, judgements, background and beliefs cause us to filter the information while we are listening to others. So it is important that we are aware of this trap. A good way to avoid this is to reflect and re-phrase the points being made by the speaker using statements like *Seems like what you are saying is* or *I am having the understanding that* etc. It will have the desired effect that the speaker would feel positive about you. It will also show that you are an active listener which is always considered good mannerism.
- **Be Responsive:** Be respectful and understanding. Any official discussion at work place is basically sharing of information and ideas. It always makes you richer in terms of knowledge and ideas gained. Try to be open and honest in your responses in a respectful way. Treat the other person in the same manner you would like others to treat you.

- **Receiving Criticism:** Receiving criticism is one of the toughest communication skills to master. Generally, in the face of criticism, people respond with either becoming aggressive or becoming too defensive. The main idea in such situations is to analyze the criticism. Understand the facts, perceptions or other factors behind such criticism. If you know that mistakes are being committed for which you are directly or indirectly responsible, it is always a good idea to avoid the argument on truthfulness. Accept the lack of attention to detail and focus on finding the solution for the problem at hand. It does not mean that you are agreeing with every criticism being thrown at you. It simply means that correcting the mistake and finding solution is far more important than quibbling about who did what.

In case you do not agree with the criticism and you are sure that criticism is unjustifiable, ask for specific examples like *Can you please describe with example what should I have done differently?* etc. Try to re-phrase the criticism and shift the focus on outcomes, areas of improvements, suggestions and feedback.

29.1.3 Conflict Resolution Skills

Conflicts at workplaces are common occurrences. A workplace without conflicts among employees is a bland, boring and not a dynamic workplace. Conflict can arise between two co-workers, between you and your superior, between two departments, between customer or client and yourself, between organizations and between you and your subordinate. Differences in working styles, personality traits, viewpoints on goals and expectations, values, beliefs, facts vs projections can all lead to conflicts. When you encounter conflicts at workplace, you normally act as one of the following:

- **Compromise:** You can try to compromise if there are really some grounds where you see a possibility of convergence. It is a good strategy in such circumstances.
- **Collaborate:** Normally, when you are in the organization for long, you understand the work culture as well as the nature beliefs of your colleagues and you also have idea of overall functioning of different departments. In such cases, collaboration is the best strategy in times of conflicts.
- **Overrule:** Use this strategy rarely and in situations where the issue at hand is far more important than personal relationships. Here you enforce your idea based on gravity of the situation.

Conflicts can be good for the work place or they might severely impede the workflow and deteriorate the environment within the group. In a healthy environment, conflicts lead to creativity, critical thinking and gets people on their



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toes to improve and perform at their best. On the other hand when conflicts slip out of hand, they lead to rumors, sabotages, lower the morale and polarize people around conflicting opinions. To resolve the conflicts, some of the best practices are listed below:

- **Be Prompt:** Resolve the problem and issues at the earliest, delays always escalate the issues into major conflicts. If emotional outbursts are involved, ensure that a bit of cool off time is given to both the parties involved.
- **Meet Face-to-Face:** If possible, meet each other face-to-face over a cup of coffee on a neutral location and see if some kind of compromise formula can be achieved.
- **Listen Empathetically:** It is never easy to calm your nerves in conflict situations. Still try to be calm, listen actively, and try to send positive signals via body language. In conflict situations, each party believes the correctness of their version. Always try to demarcate the happenings from feelings.
- **Be Problem Focused:** Do not be person focused, do not be judgmental about the personality, beliefs of other person. It is always a good idea to focus on the issue.
- **Brainstorm:** Negotiate, brainstorm, and arrive at solutions. Create something wherein both parties feel vindicated and winners.
- **Formalize and Implement:** Put the negotiating terms, solutions, way ahead etc., on paper and follow up regularly and amicably in an accountable manner.

Being the first mover in resolving the conflicts at a workplace is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, it is normally appreciated by all the stakeholders and colleagues as a sign of good personality trait. Before going forward with rapprochement, analyze your role in an objective way. Try to remain calm and make sure that emotions are in check. Always put team goals above personal ego battles and goals.

While meeting the other person, listen to his side of story first. Re-phrase some of that so that your understanding enhances and the other person feels comfortable. As mentioned above, ask for specific examples. Do not get angry or argue too much. Do not be condescending or demeaning while dealing with other person. Look out for areas of compromise and agreement. If the situation has already become way too complex, try to schedule another round of meetings. This will give more time to understand, appreciate and find solutions for the conflict under consideration.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 29.2**

I. Choose the appropriate answer:

1. Exchange of ideas between two entities is _____.
 - a. Understanding
 - b. Telling
 - c. Communication
 - d. Listening
2. Communication involves _____.
 - a. Speaking
 - b. Listening
 - c. Understanding
 - d. All of the Above
3. In absence of any receiver, there is no _____.
 - a. Communication
 - b. Sender
 - c. Message
 - d. Media
4. Which of the following is an example of a nonverbal message?
 - a. Eye Contact
 - b. Yelling
 - c. Mumbling
 - d. Crying

II. State whether the following statements are true or false:

1. Non-verbal cues like eye contact are not a part of communication skills.
2. Conflict never happens at workplace as they are hierarchical in nature.
3. Being a good listener is an important part of good communication skill.
4. Assertive communication skill means being aggressive in your communication.
5. Conflict resolution should be done as soon as possible.
6. Re-phrasing or paraphrasing is considered good communication skill.

**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

- Communication skills are an essential aspect of interpersonal skills.
- Assertion skills include verbal and non-verbal behaviour and enable us to maintain respect, satisfy our needs and defend our rights without dominating, manipulating or controlling others.
- Listening skills enable you to understand other people's point of view.
- Conflict resolution skills are important in an organization setup.



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TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What is re-phrasing or paraphrasing?
2. Give some examples of directives delivered in assertive positive way.
3. Are communication skills important at workplace? Why?
4. What kind of body language should be used in professional communication?
5. What are the three critical skills required for effective communication?
6. Describe how best conflict situations are resolved at a workplace.
7. How will you provide constructive criticism to your subordinate who has not been able to complete the given task on time?
8. What are good listening skills?



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

29.1

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|-----|----|-------|----|-------|----|------|----|-------|
| I. | 1. | a | 2. | d | 3. | a | 4. | a |
| II. | 1. | False | 2. | False | 3. | True | 4. | False |
| | 5. | True | 6. | False | | | | |