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## Monitoring Your Communication Style

Managers engage in a number of different communication styles with workers. One usually effective and helpful style is *assertive* communication. Less effective communication techniques include *aggressive*, *passive* or *passive-aggressive* styles. It is important to understand the different communication styles to help you monitor your communication and minimize your use of non-assertive patterns. It is particularly important to be aware of your communication style when interacting with a distressed worker. It can be natural to engage in passive communication with someone who is feeling distressed (due to a worry that you may further upset them by being assertive) or to engage in an aggressive or passive-aggressive style (if you are feeling frustrated or upset by the worker's behaviour). Assertive communication can be an effective alternative, and is a skill that anyone can develop.

### Assertive Communication

Assertive communication involves expressing your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings while considering and respecting the needs of others. You aim for a win-win situation by balancing your rights with the rights of others. Assertive communication is open, straightforward and earnest. You communicate your message as clearly as possible without embedding any other underlying or hidden messages. Assertive communication can help strengthen relationships, solve problems more effectively, and reduce negative emotions in the workplace (e.g., anger, frustration, guilt and fear).

One key to communicating assertively is to use "*I*" statements when talking to workers: "*I feel frustrated when you are late for our weekly progress meetings. I don't like starting over again and repeating myself.*" This type of statement indicates that you are taking ownership of your feelings and behaviours and are not blaming the worker. This can make your directives and feedback easier to accept.

Communicating assertively also includes:

- Speaking in a calm, clear and well-modulated voice
- Showing interest and sincerity by keeping eye contact, smiling and nodding your head (as appropriate)
- Maintaining an open and relaxed posture
- Communicating your feelings and needs appropriately and respectfully
- Communicating respect for others
- Asking for what you want/need (instead of ordering it)
- Asking questions in order to hear other people's feelings and needs
- Listening to the other person's point of view (without interrupting)
- Saying "no" in a productive and respectful way



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In contrast, communication styles that are *aggressive*, *passive* or *passive-aggressive* are less helpful.

### Aggressive Communication

With aggressive communication, you express your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings without considering and respecting the needs of others. You advocate for your own interests at the expense of others, attempting to use forceful communication to subdue and suppress contrasting viewpoints.

Aggressive communication often involves “*you*” *statements* and attacks on a worker, rather than effective expressions of needs. For example, stating “*you are never on time*” instead of “*I need you to be on time*”. Managers and workers who communicate in an aggressive manner are in general perceived as egoistic and unwilling to make compromises.

Other characteristics of aggressive communication may include:

- Speaking in a loud, bossy and demanding voice
- Having piercing eye contact
- Maintaining an overbearing posture
- Dominating/controlling others by blaming, intimidating, criticizing, threatening or attacking them
- Acting impulsively and rudely (low frustration tolerance)
- Commanding what you want/need (instead of requesting it)
- Rarely asking questions (only interested in your needs and goals)
- Not listening well to the other person
- Interrupting the other person frequently
- Being unwilling to accept “no” or to make compromises

### Passive Communication

Passive communication occurs when you do not express your own needs, desires, ideas and feelings, where this would be advisable. You simply don’t stand up for yourself.

Characteristics of passive communication may include:

- Speaking in an overly apologetic or submissive manner
- Avoiding eye contact/poor eye contact
- Having a slumped body posture
- Holding back on stating your feelings and needs
- Giving in to other people, and ignoring your own needs
- Doing what you are asked regardless of how you feel about it
- Being unable to say “no” when asked for a favor
- Rarely asking other people for help



## Passive-Aggressive Communication

Passive-aggressive communication is a combination of the above two styles. It involves being passive in the manner in which you express your needs, desires, ideas and feelings, but being aggressive in your underlying intent. Communicating passive-aggressively often involves not speaking your message, but rather trying to convey it through small disrespectful, annoying or ambiguous comments and actions. Workers are behaving passive-aggressively, for example, when they avoid speaking directly to managers about their concerns, and express their dissatisfaction through other behaviours that seem manipulative.

Characteristics of passive-aggressive communication may include:

- Speaking in a sarcastic voice/using sarcasm
- Using non-verbal behaviours such as sighing and eye-rolling
- Using facial expressions and body language that are inconsistent with how you feel (e.g., smiling when you're upset)
- Avoiding dealing directly with a disruptive issue (e.g., acting passively and denying that there is a problem, muttering to yourself rather than confronting the person)
- Acting deceptively (appearing cooperative but acting uncooperatively)
- Acting out in a subtle, indirect manner (e.g., sabotaging another person to get even)

Aggressive, passive, and passive-aggressive communication approaches each risk eliciting negative reactions from others. While assertive communication techniques cannot guarantee positive reactions, they are usually more effective in the long run. Also, it is important to keep in mind communication is affected in part by the level of trust that workers have in your ability to lead. This trust includes faith in your character and integrity, as well as faith in your competence to fulfill your role and lead your team. Where trust is built up, small errors in communication may be overlooked or forgiven. Where trust is absent, even an innocent comment may be taken out of context and seen as threatening or disrespectful.