

GUIDELINES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION

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A. Empathy, Intention & Listening

- 1. Consider how you would feel if you were in the other person's shoes.** Striving for empathy and understanding of others is one of the best ways to ensure that you are communicating in a respectful, honest way that is likely to be effective.
- 2. Start with positive intentions.** If your intentions for the interaction are positive, such as wanting to reach out, resolve differences, build understanding, and/or share information, others are more likely to be receptive (as opposed to how they would react when you try to change them or tell them how they are wrong).
- 3. Listen to their side and take time to let it sink in before reacting.** Take some time to consider what they are saying and what it means before you share your reactions. Try to hear their side instead of preparing what you will say while they are talking.
- 4. Consider their needs and feelings.** Once you understand their needs, give them consideration, as you would for your own needs. Constructive communication is best accomplished with an attitude of openness and a willingness to take their needs into account, even though they differ from yours.
- 5. Address them respectfully.** Treating others with respect is the best way to be treated with respect in return. Ideally, every person involved in an interaction should feel valued as equals, and that their needs matter. If you desire a change in their behavior, make it into a request instead of a demand, so that you acknowledge their right to choose.

B. Message Form

- 6. Use positive, descriptive language that does not judge, blame, criticize or label.** By describing your perceptions, thoughts and feelings, you communicate information instead of making others feel unworthy or flawed. Blaming, criticizing and labeling cause others to shut down or become defensive. Seeing the positive validates positive actions and motives in the other person, so they are more likely to hear your thoughts, feelings and needs.
- 7. Use "I" messages instead of "you" messages.** "You" messages communicate that the other person is the focus of blame for our discomfort and pain, and this shuts the door on understanding and turns discussions into fights. "I" messages communicate self-knowledge, strength and the intention to share information.

A basic template for saying I messages is “I feel ____ (feeling words) when you ____ (describe behaviors)”. Using feeling words and describing behaviors are tactics that many experts recommend for avoiding blame and judgment.

- 8. Make your body language and your tone of voice relaxed and receptive.** A harsh tone of voice, an angry frown or aggressive gestures can overpower a positive verbal message and appear threatening to your listeners. Since the majority of communication is nonverbal, be aware of what your loudness, tone of voice, gestures, posture and facial expression are saying, and focus on relaxing (tension is a signal of resistance) which signals you are open to their side of the conversation.

C. Message Meaning

- 9. Be clear.** Clearly state what behaviors you have observed and how that relates to your needs. If they do not realize what they are doing that is disrespectful or hurtful to you (or others), they will be more likely to be able to hear and understand you, and consider changing their behaviors if you can describe what they do clearly and objectively.
- 10. Be as open and honest about your feelings and needs as possible.** Expressing your feelings and needs is the best way to let others know where you are coming from and to help them get past their cognitive barriers and understand you. Information about feelings is important data about how a relationship is progressing and how it works for the people involved. Neither side deserves to be hurt or left out, or the relationship is not working and all involved should work to correct things.
- 11. Focus on strengths and positive characteristics more than weaknesses.** Positive reinforcement is the most powerful change technique that we have, so we can help each other to be more empowered by making note of strengths and successes in each other, instead of criticizing and focusing on problems and difficulties. If your feedback attacks or otherwise forces things into a negative frame, they are likely to become defensive and resist hearing you. So, work on creating a positive frame, with a goal to encourage others to move in a better direction.

References

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- Rivers, Dennis (2004). *The Seven Challenges: A Workbook and Reader about Communicating More Cooperatively*, 100 pages, Retrieved from www.coopcomm.org