

# WORKSHOP 1 WORKPLACE INTERACTION

## GOALS

- ▶ Learn the importance of getting along with coworkers.
- ▶ Discover the value of good communication skills.
- ▶ Explore supervisor-employee relations in various workplace environments.



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## GETTING ALONG

### Interpersonal Communication Resources

- Video (24:00)
- CD-ROM Study Guide
- Instructor's Resource CD-ROM
- WebTutor
- ExamView Pro Testing CD-ROM

### Knowing Your Place

By not taking other people's needs and opinions into account, Cara sounds like a know-it-all. Instead of lecturing staff members, demanding tasks accomplished without prior notice, or being the sole input on an advisory board, Cara should work to encourage others' opinions and suggestions.


The number-one workplace fact of life is that you have to get along with everyone you work with. Whether it's the CEO, your line supervisor, or your cubicle mate, you must interact pleasantly, effectively, and appropriately. And "getting along" doesn't mean just keeping quiet and doing your job. Today's employees are required to be active participants in the workplace. This workshop examines the importance of using effective communication to maintain good interpersonal relations at work. More than any other talent or ability, strong communication skills could be the key to advancing your career.

### Knowing Your Place

After two weeks as the assistant clothing buyer at an upscale department store, Cara is completing her tasks in record time. Yet, she can't ignore the feeling that her coworkers don't like her.

When Cara tells a coworker everything she knows about the latest fashions, she is ignored. When she tells the floor manager to complete an inventory of all

outerwear by the end of the day, the two of them get into an argument. When her supervisor asks her to head up an advisory team made up of employees from different departments, no one else is invited to or encouraged to talk or make any decisions.

 **What could Cara do to improve the way she communicates with coworkers?**

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## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

### *It's Not What You Say, It's How You Say It*

Your coworkers will be more receptive to what you have to say when you take care to deliver your message appropriately.

- **Be a “strong” listener.** Your fellow employees will be interested in your ideas when you show genuine interest in their ideas—it’s a two-way street.
- **Check your body language.** A smiling face and open posture convey interest, while crossed arms and a frown send negative signals. Lean forward and make eye contact as often as possible.
- **Use “I” language.** Using the word “you” to point out problems puts people on the defensive. Instead of saying, “You made me feel like a fool when you pointed out my mistake,” try saying, “I was embarrassed when my mistake was pointed out in that way.”
- **Validate the other person’s ideas.** Show others that you understand and respect what they’re saying. For example, try restating what you’ve just been told: “It seems that answering the telephone is taking too much of your time.” Validation helps minimize conflict and encourages others to be more receptive to what you have to say.
- **Use the same medium.** Communicate in the medium favored by the other person. If a coworker prefers to e-mail you, e-mail them. If a coworker prefers to use the phone, call them.
- **Be mindful of what you put in writing.** It’s important to remember that written communication is permanent—you can’t take it back! Whether you’re writing a fax, e-mail, memo, or letter, make sure your tone is friendly and professional.
- **Avoid using profanity and derogatory terms.** It should go without saying, but some people forget that using offensive language is the quickest way to turn someone off. Many businesses have specific policies against using offensive language in the workplace.

### Key Ideas

- ★ **interpersonal**—concerning or involving relationships between people
- ★ **communication skills**—the ability to read, write, listen, and speak effectively
- ★ **counterproductive**—a process that hinders the production of something; work that goes against the attainment of a goal
- ★ **proactive**—taking the initiative by acting rather than reacting to events
- ★ **employee empowerment**—a management philosophy that gives employees more opportunities to generate new ideas, solve problems, and make decisions



### On the Net

How can you make your daily interactions in the workplace more satisfying, handle criticism from a coworker or supervisor with honesty and grace, or keep your cool under fire? This Web site offers a number of insightful articles on effective interpersonal communication. Read them at:

<http://www.pertinent.com/pertinfo/business/communication/>

### Tools of the Trade

This workshop emphasizes the importance of understanding that how others perceive you affects how they respond to you. Review Key Ideas, definitions, and the guidelines presented in Tools of the Trade.

Remind learners that a standard personal interaction tool is to place yourself in the position of the other person to evaluate the appropriateness of your speech and actions. Another is to be aware of the other person's body language as you speak. Are you boring or offending him or her? Does she or he seem to be in a hurry to leave?

## The Importance of Getting Along

When you feel good about your relations with others, you'll not only do your job better, you'll find it more satisfying. Being aware of counterproductive behaviors that make your job more difficult—and anticipating ways to prevent them—will improve your workplace interactions.

- **Keep conflict to a minimum.** Focus on finding solutions to the problems you encounter with other people instead of trying to “win” or concentrating on personal differences.
- **Avoid power struggles.** Instead of proving to a coworker or supervisor that you are better, smarter, or more deserving of authority, work on how you can help each other achieve common goals.
- **Be proactive.** Watch for problems that could hinder workplace relationships. Head them off before they become unmanageable.
- **Avoid gossip.** Avoiding gossip will save you time and emotional energy. Speak to others directly about your concerns, and you will likely get the same treatment in return.
- **Work as a team.** Nothing is more valuable to an employer than a person who is willing to minimize personal interests in order to achieve a common goal.

## Interacting on Different Levels

Different workplace relationships call for flexible communication skills. Your manner toward a supervisor, for example, will most likely differ from the way you communicate with a coworker or with someone who reports to you.

- **Adapt to your environment.** In some “traditional” work environments, employees are expected to keep their mouths shut, take orders from above, and do their jobs. In most modern workplaces, however, workers are expected to be creative problem solvers, and to work as teams to achieve common goals. In these environments, a greater amount of two-way communication about ideas takes place between employees and supervisors.
- **Be respectful.** Showing respect to every person you interact with in the workplace is vital for smooth communications. It's not unusual to show even more respect to a supervisor. For example, you might address your supervisor as “Ms. \_\_\_\_\_,” “Dr. \_\_\_\_\_,” “sir,” or “ma'am,” if that is how your supervisor wishes to be addressed.
- **Practice “employee empowerment.”** When workers know that their abilities and contributions are valued, they feel motivated and willing to contribute. Share responsibilities and encourage ideas from coworkers and those who report to you.
- **Adjust your conversation.** Although it is always good to keep talk that is not related to work to a minimum, casual conversation is more appropriate when shared among coworkers. Conversations with supervisors should be mainly work-related.



## INTRODUCTION TO INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

### Segment 1

### Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

View and discuss  
Segment 1: *Introduction to Interpersonal Communication*.  
Running time: approx. 3:30.

This video explores how environment shapes the way people communicate on the job. Business professionals will provide advice about avoiding conflicts and communicating with others in an effective “style.” As you view the video, compare business interactions among coworkers with those between supervisors and coworkers. Think about how workers can avoid conflict by showing respect for others and by listening actively.



*When you feel good about your relations with others, you'll not only do your job better, you'll find it more satisfying.*

### Post-Viewing Questions

1. Why is effective communication with coworkers important to success on the job?

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2. How should communication with coworkers differ from communication with supervisors?

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### Post-Viewing Questions

1. Effective communication facilitates respect between coworkers. Without it, conflicts arise and teamwork is hindered.
2. Use a communication style that is more professional when interacting with supervisors. It's important to respect a supervisor's position of authority, while not letting his or her authority intimidate you. Remember that supervisors are human too.

## ON THE JOB

### *Input for Hire*

Tianna has to choose someone to represent the telemarketing department on a company-wide committee that will look at ways to solicit input from employees. Tianna's company hopes to boost morale and increase the empowerment of individual workers. Management wants to hear from the front lines and give employees on all levels an opportunity to contribute. Tianna is considering two of her coworkers—Stan and Ari.

Ari has been in the department for four years and has voiced a lot of opinions about how things should change. Ari's ideas are valuable, but his style needs some work. In fact, all Ari does lately is complain. He manages to do his job well enough, but obviously resents the decisions made by upper management.

Stan doesn't seem to have many gripes about the way management makes decisions. Stan has only been with the company for 10 months, but in that time he's taken on new responsibilities and come up with valuable cost-saving ideas for the company.

Tianna has not ruled Ari out as a potential representative for the committee. Ari needs to feel valued, and Tianna knows that Ari and everyone who interacts with him would benefit by a change in his communication style. Placing him on the committee would provide a constructive outlet for his opinions. In a new setting, Ari might learn to express himself better.

Stan, on the other hand, already expresses himself well. He knows how to present ideas so others embrace them, and with his positive energy, he would be an asset to the committee.

#### **On the Job** *Input for Hire*

Answers will vary. Students who say Tianna should pick Ari will probably say that being selected for the committee will boost Ari's morale and give Tianna an opportunity to talk to him about his attitude. Students who pick Stan may say that Tianna should consider her own career and pick the person she thinks will represent the department positively—and thereby reflect well on her managerial skills. Stress that either choice is valid as long as the learner demonstrates good reasons for making it.

Answers will vary; for example, Ari and Stan could meet before the first committee meeting to share their ideas, or the person not chosen could write a memo giving his ideas for consideration.



If you were Tianna, whom would you pick? Why?

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How could the person you did not select help the company achieve its goals?

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# Literature Connection

## *The Human Touch*

by Spencer Michael Free

'Tis the human touch in this world that counts,  
The touch of your hand and mine,  
Which means far more to the fainting heart  
Than shelter and bread and wine;  
For shelter is gone when the night is o'er,  
And bread lasts only a day,  
But the touch of the hand, the sound of a voice  
Sing on in the soul always.

**Spencer Michael Free was a physician. What do you think he meant by “the human touch”? Why is it so important?**

“The Human Touch,” by Spencer Michael Free. Public domain.

### The Human Touch

Spencer Michael Free (1856–1938) was an American physician who practiced medicine and surgery for over 50 years. He also wrote several poems, including “The Human Touch,” which is widely quoted by medical and social work organizations.

To a physician, “the human touch” probably refers to communication, compassion, care, concern, listening, and reassurance. This poem is a good example of how interpersonal communication and compassion are critical aspects of medical care and the helping professions.

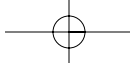
## PRACTICE

1. With a partner, choose one of the two situations below. Role-play a conflict between coworkers. First, act out the conflict using confrontational language and negative body language. Then, act out the same conflict, showing how it can be resolved with the methods discussed in this workshop.
  - A desk in a prime location has just been vacated, and two different office workers feel they are entitled to it.
  - A worker on a road construction crew feels that a coworker is being overly bossy.
2. Design a cartoon depicting effective communication among coworkers. Create your own illustrations, borrow clippings from magazines, or print images from the Internet. Include word balloons.
3. Using the Internet or other resources, research tips for communicating effectively with your supervisor. Then, make a checklist of “Do”s and “Don’t”s based on your findings.



### Practice

1. Feel free to set up different conflict situations learners might understand better, or let learners improvise their own.
2. This practice could be done in pairs.
3. Jump-start this practice with humorous examples to get learners started, such as, “DON’T tell your supervisor he needs to dress better.”



# SUMMARY

- ▶ Good communication skills help you interact with coworkers and supervisors to make decisions, solve problems, and achieve company goals.
- ▶ Relationships between supervisors and employees are changing. Yesterday's workplace often sought employees who would simply follow instructions. In many of today's workplaces, employees are asked to anticipate problems and solve them creatively.

# REVIEW QUESTIONS



1. How can communication skills help you interact with your coworkers?

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### Review Questions

1. Strong communication skills help minimize conflict, enable teams to work together, and foster a positive work atmosphere. Good communication breaks down barriers.
2. In traditional workplaces, employees use name titles, show respect, and quietly follow instructions. In modern workplaces, employees still use titles when appropriate and show respect, but they are expected to help solve problems and make valuable contributions.
3. Answers may vary slightly. In nearly all settings, employees cannot work effectively unless their interaction with coworkers is productive and team-oriented. Being aware of counterproductive behaviors that make your job more difficult, and anticipating ways to prevent them, will improve your workplace interactions. Your coworkers will be more receptive to what you have to say when you take care to deliver your message appropriately.

2. What form does supervisor-employee interaction often take in traditional workplaces? What form does supervisor-employee interaction often take in modern workplaces?

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3. Why do you think getting along with others at work is so important? Why isn't it enough to do your job well?

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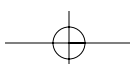
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# PROJECTS

1. Interview someone you know who supervises five or more people. Ask them the following questions, and create at least two questions of your own. Record what you've learned from the interview, including whether and how your perception of the person's role has changed.
  1. What methods and styles do you want people to use when they communicate with you?
  2. How do you view your relationship with those working under you?
  3. Do you believe you have a role in their professional growth?
  4. What do you like to see most in an employee?
  5. What do you like to see least?
  6. What weaknesses do you observe in the ways people communicate at work?
2. Write a one-act play about a group of people required to work as a team to achieve a common goal. Develop each character's personality by writing dialogue that shows how each character communicates with the team. For example, some characters may show a need to control, others may provide little input and choose to passively follow, and others may make worthwhile contributions. Show how individual characters' communication skills succeed or fail to empower others on the team and foster a spirit of cooperation.
3. Communicate with three people that you work with or go to school with in the way you think each prefers (phone, e-mail, letter, face-to-face, etc.). Then, communicate with them in the way you believe they like least. Compare the amount of time it took them to respond, as well as the nature of their responses. Record the information.

## Projects

Have learners complete one or more of the projects as a homework or out-of-class assignments. Encourage them to work in pairs or small groups.

1. Suggest that students create a table to record their findings. They should also describe the supervisor's company and department. Ask learners to discuss how responses differ according to different workplaces. A traditional industrial setting will differ from a knowledge-based workplace. An entrepreneurial, sales-oriented workplace will differ from a hierarchical, professional office, such as a high-powered law firm.
2. This project would make an excellent group exercise, as well as an individual exercise. The group could present the play to the class. Or, they could develop a worksheet for other learners to use to synopsise each character's interaction style and communication skills, or lack of skills.
3. Suggest that students create a table or graphic, such as a bar chart, with their findings.

*"I see each person who comes into my life as an opportunity to learn something about human nature, and myself. Each person has a lesson to teach me. I try to learn."*

—Holly Archer