

# How to Communicate Differences

by Mike Hawkins  
[mike@alpinelink.com](mailto:mike@alpinelink.com)



There are few absolute truths that are understated more than this one “good relationships depend on good communications.” Of course, good relationships depend on other attributes as well, but people who communicate effectively typically enjoy much better relationships than those who don’t. Or stated more directly, people who have poor communication skills struggle in their relationships.

Communication involves talking and listening. It involves managing your own emotions as well as reading those of others. It includes showing empathy and understanding others. It includes sharing thoughts, feelings, differences of opinion, needs, wants, and desires. More subtly, but most importantly, it includes *how* thoughts, feelings, opinions, needs, and wants are shared. For example, if you ask for something, how you ask for it is often more important than for what you are asking. The ask can come across as coercion or an invitation. It can be interpreted as a controlling demand or a gentle request.

Whether at home or work, a particularly important communication skill is the ability to share needs and wants when one person’s want is at odds with another’s. In the workplace, employees are paid to do work that fulfills an organization’s needs. But despite wide acceptance of this reality, how a manager asks an employee to do something can either leave an employee feeling valued or micromanaged. At home, how people ask their kids and spouses to help out around the house can either come across as family teamwork or admonishment.

Communication at the most basic level involves two parts—how something is said and how it is interpreted, hence the cliché “it takes two to get along.” In every exchange of ideas and feelings, one person is responsible for what is said and the other for how it is interpreted. So great relationships typically involve two people who know how to effectively talk as well as listen. Both people are careful with what they say as well as how they interpret what they hear.

People effective at the talking part of communication can use few words or many, but whatever they say is said in a constructive way. For example, when in conflict, they avoid attacking people with words such as “you never” or “you always.” They avoid negative comparisons and defense triggering accusations. They are careful not to present their opinions as indisputable facts. They don’t use leading questions that are clearly intended to manipulate. They don’t correct or accuse people of wrong thinking or feeling, especially based on what they subjectively consider right versus wrong.

People effective at listening are also careful. They don’t over personalize what they hear. They listen with the intent to understand rather than respond. They strive to relate to how the other person is feeling and thinking in their circumstances. They are careful not to assume what the other person thinks, or worse, project their own issues onto the other person. In the context of conflict, they don’t assume comments are somehow intended to be an attack on them. Or that a difference of opinion is an attempt to control them or a demand to change how they think or feel.

Talking and listening is generally easy until there is a difference of opinion. Then becomes what is perhaps the biggest challenge for people—sharing differences. This includes thoughts, feelings, needs, and wants that might even be the exact opposite of the other person’s. It also includes sharing a desire for someone to change—either to reframe how they think about something or to modify a behavior.

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How do effective communicators share ideas and feelings that might be at odds with what someone else is feeling, thinking, or doing without making them feel coerced or pressured? How do effective listeners receive ideas without thinking they are being controlled or manipulated? Listed below are a few best practices to consider. Use these as a checklist in your next conversation when attempting to discuss and resolve differences between you and others:

When leading the discussion:

- a. Start with a mindset of cooperation rather than confrontation or coercion. Seek to work with others rather than control them.
- b. Manage your ego. No matter your title, intellect, or past success, you don't know everything so don't come across as if you do.
- c. Show empathy for the circumstances others are dealing with before sharing your opinions, needs, or requests.
- d. Compliment others for their efforts, especially before a difficult conversation. Foster a spirit of cooperation.
- e. Pull people rather than push them by focusing on what works rather than what doesn't. Give positive examples that pull people toward a desired outcome.
- f. Avoid making others feel wrong. Leave out condescending words or comparisons that come across as attacks and provoke anger.
- g. Avoid over-functioning by talking for others. Don't tell them how they think and feel, or try to convince them without giving them a chance to talk.
- h. Don't assume others think like you. Don't expect others to hold your values or see situations as you do. Don't hold a grudge due to differing perspectives.
- i. Don't project your own issues on others. As in bad politics, don't think and do the very opposite of what you are asking of others.
- j. Don't use "I'm just being honest" as an excuse to be rude. Or say "I'm doing this for you" when in reality you are justifying yourself.
- k. Manage your emotions. Don't intimidate or bully the other person by raising your voice or displaying uncontrolled emotions.
- l. If you want someone to do something, start with the problem to solve, opportunity to be leveraged, and supporting background information.
- m. Confirm the problem, opportunity, need, and the context for the request. Frame and gain agreement on the problem before solving it.
- n. Rather than demand a solution, explore solutions. Ask for others' ideas as well as share your own. Reach agreement on what is to be done.

When doing the listening:

- a. As with talking, start with a mindset of humble cooperation rather than a prideful mindset that wants to confront, win, or defend.
- b. As made famous by Stephen Covey, seek to understand before being understood. Ask questions to clarify and understand.
- c. Avoid interrupting. Let people finish their thought. Let them vent, even if directed at you before responding.

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- d. Relate to other's feelings. Show empathy for other's opinions, circumstances, feelings, and requests.
- e. Be openminded. Realize that your way isn't the only way and possibly not the best way.
- f. Manage your feelings. Remain calm. Respect that the other person has a right to their own opinions and feelings.
- g. Avoid over-personalizing others thoughts. Unless a message is clearly directed at you, don't assume it is.
- h. When you have finished listening and made the other person feel heard, take a break if needed to consider what was said or asked.
- i. If you are asked to do something against your values, politely but candidly explain the opposing value that you won't compromise.
- j. Look for the kernel of truth in what the other person is saying or asking. Take responsibility for what you have implied or done.
- k. Offer your opinion or opposing need without making excuses. Avoid the need to be right unless you have been falsely accused.
- l. If you have been falsely accused, explain what happened from your perspective. Present facts as objectively as possible.
- m. Expect to be treated fairly and respectfully. Politely ask to stop a conversation or offer your perspective when your boundary has been crossed.
- n. Suggest an alternative solution or approach to finding a solution if appropriate. Seek to find a compromise that achieves both people's needs and wants.

Try these practices for the best possible outcomes when communicating your needs .... and in particular when communicating with difficult people with opposing opinions, needs, and wants.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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