


# Relationships at work

Supporting you  
to be your best



A photograph of two women, one younger and one older, looking down at a document together in what appears to be a library or office setting. The background is filled with bookshelves. A teal graphic element is in the top-left corner.

**This life guide will help you build positive relationships at work, identify different types of relationships and suggest ways of managing challenging conversations.**

**Do you recognise any of these situations?**

**The head no longer speaks to me directly unless to reprimand**

**School is not a very happy work place at the moment.**

**We are constantly shouted and at moaned at from management**

**Their definitely needs to be some sort of training to help younger teachers learn to interact positively with upset parents**

*Quotes taken from the Education Support Partnership Health and Wellbeing Survey, 2011*

## Types of relationship

Staff in education have to deal with a number of different types of relationships with all types of people. The difficulty is in knowing how to manage the different needs, expectations and requirements of each of these. Think about all the relationships that you currently have within your workplace. Try writing some of these relationships down:

- ▶ Mentor
- ▶ Colleague
- ▶ Classroom teacher
- ▶ Friend
- ▶ Union rep

Look at your list. Ask yourself how these relationships are different. Think about how you communicate with your colleagues when you are in each of these roles.

What skills are required for each of them? Where are your strengths? What relationships are more challenging than other? Do you struggle to communicate in certain roles?

## Difficult relationships

Conflict or discomfort among colleagues can result from a number of behaviours, including:

- ▶ Unbalanced teamwork – where one member of the team does not pull his or her weight
- ▶ Lack of support from a mentor
- ▶ Disagreements over approaches to particular pupils, curriculum or staffing issues
- ▶ Competitiveness over areas of responsibility or expertise

... or any number of problems that occur when people just don't get on

The common factor is conflict: a direct disagreement between participants. Disagreements consist of both the objective point at issue and the subjective emotional involvement invested by the participants. Both elements must be addressed for an effective resolution. Resolving the emotional side requires you to understand the situation from the other person's point of view. This can be particularly hard when your personalities are very different.

## I'm different, he's difficult, they're impossible

We cannot get on with everyone we meet. All of us have character traits that will cause difficulty for others. We need to understand those differences in order to cope with them. We also need to understand how conflict can arise in dealing with a difficult person. Different personality types react in characteristic ways in conflict situations. Recognising these dynamics is the first step to coping with the situation, and you can begin by recognising the role that you yourself play.



## Improving your own response to conflict

Learn to recognise and control your defence mechanism. Identify your triggers. Consider what always makes you angry. Do certain words instantly provoke a reaction? Are you irritable before your coffee? Are there certain times of day you are better than other?

Next identify how you usually react. Do you tend to shout back? Do you withdraw? Can you be passive aggressive? Are you too nice?

Consider taking the following positive steps:

- ▶ Learn to listen
- ▶ Try to be open and receptive
- ▶ Ensure that you understand what is being said to you – calmly ask someone to clarify if you do not
- ▶ Be aware of your own strengths and weaknesses
- ▶ Actively take steps to work on your weaknesses, particularly those that affect your work life and relationships

If you feel that your own behaviour is not the only factor in the conflict, perhaps the source of your difficulty is ineffective communication.

Being able to identify different types of people can help you to assess and frame your responses so that someone is more likely to understand. You can then alter your behaviour accordingly to get results.

There will obviously be situations in which you do not have time to diagnose a personality type, but there are some useful tips you can use:

- ▶ watch the person to see if there are repeat occurrences of the behaviour. If it happens more than twice, it is unlikely to be an accident
- ▶ think about stress, not only for the person involved but also yourself. Stress clouds the judgement and alters your perspective
- ▶ try talking on a personal level to the individual. It might not resolve the difficulty in itself, but it will certainly help in your assessment of your mutual situation

Sometimes an external facilitator or mediation service can assist when two or more people would like their relationships to be better. This can often prevent problems from escalating and keeps the control of the outcome with the parties concerned.

# Communication

The key to any relationship is communication. Poor communication is often the cause of many relationship problems. Many teachers are adept at communicating effectively with pupils and students, but can be less successful when talking with other adults. Before you can begin to work on your communication skills, you first need to understand what helps you and what prevents you from communicating effectively.

Think about the people you enjoy communicating with: your friends, family and colleagues. Try and identify skills, attitudes and values that make communication easy.

Write them down under the heading:

## **Aids to communication**

Next think about the people you struggle to communicate with. Again, reflect on the skills, attitudes and values they employ that make communication so difficult. Write them down next to your previous column, under the heading:

## **Barriers to communication**

Hopefully, once complete, this will give you a clearer understanding of what you need to be able to communicate well. You can then focus on techniques to break down the barriers to communication.

Your table may look something like this:

Communicators	Aids to communication	Barriers to communications
Skills		
Attitudes		
Values		

## Breaking down barriers

- ▶ avoid assumptions
- ▶ agree 'rules' of communication before speaking, eg no interruptions, length of responses, etc
- ▶ focus on facts, rather than emotions (where possible)
- ▶ give space and time to others speaking
- ▶ use 'I' statements, rather than 'you' statements, ie "I felt that", not "you made me feel"
- ▶ respect yourself and others' right to speak
- ▶ listen

# Listening

Listening is one of the most powerful ways to break down barriers. Our five senses are constantly monitoring our environment and our emotional and behavioural responses will be informed by that analysis. Much of this is automatic and we pay little attention to them in the course of our daily lives.

It is important to note that although our senses may be in passive mode, they are also monitoring the environment, undertaking "constant risk assessment" and can at any time react, thanks to our inbuilt alarm response, or 'fight or flight' triggers.

Listening and hearing are two linked but distinct experiences. Hearing is, for most people, a largely automatic, unconscious process by which our neurological mechanisms translate sound waves into recognisable patterns. Listening is the self-conscious process of sifting out that which we wish to pay attention to and understanding what is being said.

Listening skills allow one to learn, make informed decisions, and establish meaningful relationships with others. Developing an understanding requires a number of activities such as processing, comprehending, analysing and drawing conclusions.

Listening operates at different levels depending on the circumstances:

- ▶ Cosmetic listening – I'm hearing the words. It looks like I'm listening, but I'm not
- ▶ Conversational listening - I'm engaged in the conversation, more focused on me than on you, listening, talking, thinking, talking
- ▶ Active listening - I'm more focused on you than on me (some internal dialogue may still be happening). Listener is mentally registering and recording facts, confirms they are listening using appropriate sounds, gestures or expressions, using clarifying questions, repeating information back and offering observations
- ▶ Deep listening - I'm focused on what you're saying, recording facts, paying attention (minimum internal dialogue is taking place)
- ▶ Non-verbal listening – how the person says something may be as important what they say. Non-verbal listening is paying attention to body language, facial expressions, gestures, or emphasis on words. Non-verbal cues can make up 55% of all communication (according to research conducted by UCLA)

Listening is a key part of the communication process and is significant in that it requires us to use both our hearing and sight senses.

The human mind can generally process information at a faster rate than it can formulate a spoken response. The result is that the mind tends to wander. Active listening is a process of consciously focusing for a specific purpose and requires full attention, comprehension, and then testing the integrity of the message. I am clarifying the other person's spoken thoughts, as well as taking in the other person's non-verbal message.

## Poor listeners

Poor listeners have a number of characteristics in common. They are likely to:

- ▶ interrupt or finish the other person's sentences
- ▶ think about what they are going to say next
- ▶ hurry the other person
- ▶ daydream
- ▶ argue with the other person
- ▶ give unsolicited advice
- ▶ tend not to respond or to jump conclusions

## Good listeners

In contrast, good listeners will respond by:

- ▶ encouraging the other person
- ▶ asking questions when they don't understand something
- ▶ looking at things from the other person perspective
- ▶ restating the important points to show that they understand
- ▶ maintaining emotional control
- ▶ staying mentally present - being patient
- ▶ helping people to draw their own conclusions
- ▶ offering all the same level of courtesy and respect

## Active listening

### Active listening begins with:

Understanding what the person wants. This enables the listener to respond appropriately. Most people like to be heard. To communicate more effectively use active listening strategies, such as rephrasing, paraphrasing or repeating what the speaker has just said. This can limit misunderstandings and assumptions and makes it clear that you are listening and that you consider it important.

Clarifying the message. To clarify, ask questions like, "Who?" "What?" "Where?" "When?" "How?" and "Why?" These are open-ended questions designed to elicit more than just a simple "Yes" or "No" response.

Confirming understanding. This can be used at any point during the conversation. It's especially useful before concluding a conversation. For example, "Before we wrap up the meeting, let me just recap the pertinent points".

### Active listening involves listening at three levels:

1. Paying attention to the speaker and to the message. Rather than listening half-heartedly or forming a reply in one's head while the person is still speaking, concentrate on what the person is saying.
2. Building trust and rapport. Being sensitive to the communication style of the other person will help bridge the communication gap, demonstrate respect and build trust and rapport.
3. Sharing meaning. Reiterate what you think the other person has said. Pick up on non-verbal cues and reflect them back to the person to reassure them that you have understood the message correctly. Paraphrase the message and ask questions to clarify.



# Appropriate challenging/difficult conversations

Appropriate challenging involves placing demands on people because, generally speaking, they are receiving information they don't necessarily want. It's not surprising that we often withhold 'bad news' even when it is in the other person's interest to hear it.

Challenging people respectfully is both difficult and demanding. It frequently involves unsolicited information/feedback about aspects of behaviour which the person may be unaware. Generally, this invariably produces discomfort.

One can never be sure how the other person will react. The uncomfortable news involved in any kind of challenge can arouse discomfort in the challenger, no matter how he/she thinks the receiver will react. Anxiety is a normal part of the process, but if you fall victim to this you will be less effective than you might otherwise be.

People often avoid challenging conversations because they are afraid of conflict. But it may be appropriate when the person is:

- ▶ reluctant to accept their responsibility for certain events
- ▶ clinging to old dysfunctional attitudes or ways of behaving
- ▶ being evasive
- ▶ reluctant to consider an alternative view point or idea
- ▶ failing to understand the consequences of their behaviour
- ▶ failing to meet agreed deadlines
- ▶ behaving in a way that contradicts what they say

## Effective challenging

Challenging has to steer a course between too aggressive and too submissive. Effective challenging involves being assertive and raising awareness of what is happening, supported by facts.

To do this:

- ▶ Ask a direct, open question about what you sense the person is avoiding, e.g. "When, How, Why, What, Where"?
- ▶ Feed back to the person about how their attitude or behaviour impacts on others
- ▶ Advise what further help and support is available, if appropriate
- ▶ Change focus from "what?" to "how?", from "then and there" to "here and now", and from "I can't" to "I choose not to"
- ▶ Affirm all the positive qualities the other person possesses
- ▶ Ask for their feedback and thoughts after you have stated your case. Effective challenging is a two-way street.





**Get Support**

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to be your best**



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