



Constructive Communication: Four Steps to Cooperative Resolution

An issue has arisen and now you know you need to have “a talk” with someone at work. You want the conversation to go well but you know there is a very good chance your coworker won’t respond well when you bring up the problem. You wonder, “How can I bring this up in a way that won’t cause him to become so reactive? The following is one approach which can greatly increase the probability of a constructive outcome.



Four Steps to Cooperative Resolution

Let’s briefly list the four steps and then discuss each step in more detail.

1. Acknowledge the behavior
2. State how you feel when the behavior happens
3. Solicit feedback
4. Solicit a win/win solution

Acknowledge the Behavior

Begin the conversation by pointing out in a direct inoffensive way, the behavior you found troublesome. Directly stating the behavior helps us to be very clear so the other person won’t have to guess about what we’re referring to or how much difficulty the behavior may be causing us. Finding a way to point out the behavior in an inoffensive way may be a little more difficult. Certainly there is a percentage of people who will insist on finding offense in even the most inoffensive statement. Although it’s difficult to know exactly where the other person’s “verbal landmines” may be buried, do your best to pitch your message in a way that will be as comfortable as possible for the other person to catch.

Maintain a casual tone of voice

For a healthy start, find a time when the other person is in a relaxed state of mind and begin with a casual, relaxed body posture and tone of voice. I often begin with the phrase, “I noticed...” as a memory aid to keep my tone of voice casual, relaxed, and non-threatening.

Focus only on what was observed

Beginning with “I noticed...” also reminds me to stay focused on only the behavior I observed. Avoid stating what you think the other person was trying to do, or what he or she was thinking (mind reading). Stay focused on the behavior that was specific and observable.



Avoid “You” statements

For extra credit, avoid beginning with a “You” statement (as in, “You just *(insert behavior here)*”). For some people, hearing a statement about their behavior that begins with a “you” may sound as accusatory as a verbal shaking finger. For others, it may remind them of lectures they have received in the past from parents or others. For the speaker, it may be difficult to avoid a lecturing tone of voice when beginning a statement with “You....”

State how you feel when the behavior happens

Use an “I statement”

Beginning the second step with an “I statement” will help you to express in a non-threatening way how you felt impacted by the other person’s behavior. This type of statement will also help the listener to hear how his or her behavior impacts you without feeling judged. The goal in this statement is to objectively bring the behavior up for discussion with a focus on finding a resolution that will be acceptable to both parties. Causing the other person to not feel judged will result in less defensiveness on his or her part and more willingness to work on a resolution with you. Once the other person “digs in” into a defensive position, he or she will often become more rigid and less flexible when it comes to modifying his or her behavior in an attempt to come to a cooperative resolution.

An “I statement” may follow the format of “I feel (*emotion*) when (*action*) happens.” For example, “I feel frustrated when I’m interrupted.” You’ve probably noticed that you could have said, “I feel frustrated when you interrupt me.” While that statement would be just as true as the previous statement, the inclusion of “you” in the second half of the statement may cause the other person to feel judged and to begin to focus on protecting him or her self rather than focusing on the impact of the behavior on you. Although the word, “you,” can be included in the second half of the “I statement,” excluding it altogether will increase the probability that the other person will feel less defensive. Other examples of “I statements” are:

I feel hurt when I’m not included in plans.

I feel frustrated when my opinions aren’t regarded.

I feel threatened when I’m blamed for things not working out.

Anger as a secondary emotion

You may have noticed none of the above statements contained anger as an emotion (“I feel angry when....”). In a great many instances, anger appears as a secondary emotion in that the feeling is often preceded by another emotion and then anger appears as a response to the first emotion. The most common precursors to anger are hurt, frustration, and fear.

In confronting anger, many find it helpful to focus on the emotion that was felt first. When you express to another person that you feel hurt, frustrated or fearful, it will be easier for the other person to respond with compassion because he or she likely has experienced a similar emotion at some point in his or her past. If the expression is one of anger (“I feel angry when....”) the other person will likely feel that he or she is a target of that anger (“I did something wrong and you are angry with me”) and is more likely to respond defensively as a form of self-protection.



There is an additional benefit to looking for the emotion behind a person's anger. When another person expresses anger toward you, you will likely feel less attacked and more compassionate toward the person expressing the anger if you look for the emotion that came first. In managing conflict, the difficulty often lies not so much in knowing what to do, but in doing what you know should be done. Looking for the emotion behind another person's anger can cause you to be more willing to do the things you know you should do to resolve the conflict.

Solicit feedback

Use active listening skills

The third step in this four-step process is to solicit feedback. This can be accomplished through a simple, generic question, "What's causing this to happen (the behavior mentioned in step 1)?" Here, the other person will have an opportunity to tell you all of the reasons why he or she acted as described in the first step. It's important to listen empathically at this stage, so the other person will truly have an opportunity to be, and feel, listened to. Use all of the active listening skills you may have learned before. Backtrack some of his or her key phrases so he or she will feel you're both "on the same page." Paraphrase both the content and emotion he or she is communicating so he or she can confirm or correct your understanding on both counts. Ask clarifying questions to gain an even better understanding of his or her point of view.

Pull as much information as you can/let them empty their bag

During this third step, your goal is to gain as deep an understanding of the situation from the other person's perspective as possible. Allow the other person to vent, to fully describe the situation from his or her perspective. Perhaps maybe even attempt to persuade you that his or her behavior was perfectly reasonable and acceptable. Your goal during this step is not to debate or persuade. Rather, your goal is to fully understand the other person's behavior from his or her perspective and to cause him or her to feel fully listened to. Don't fear; resolution will come in the next step.

Solicit a win/win solution

Lead the other person in brainstorming possible solutions

For the fourth step in this four-step process, lead the other person in a cooperative brainstorming process for possible solutions. This can be done with another simple, generic, question, "How can we not have (or avoid) this situation in the future?" Allow the other person to generate possible solutions. Your goal at this point, as in any brainstorming session, is to merely help the other person to generate as many solutions as possible.

Some solutions will be very creative – remain nonjudgmental

Be forewarned, the first few solutions generated by the other person will likely be very creative and maybe even self-serving. As in any brainstorming session, it will be very important to remain non-judgmental at this point. That includes refraining from judging the possible solutions verbally as well as non-verbally (watch those rolling eyes, and folded arms). Any judgment here will likely cause the other



person to feel less willing to participate in brainstorming possible solutions and will shut down the process.

Select one solution to try on a trial basis

When you feel a suitable number of possible solutions have been generated, select one solution that appears to best meet the needs of you and the other person, and suggest you both try out that solution on a “trial basis.” Be careful to not lead the brainstorming session only until the other person generates the solution you wanted all along. Keep working at generating possible solutions beyond the point when one or two acceptable solutions appear. You never know, you and the other person may come up with a solution that hadn’t occurred to either of you before. A “trial basis” suggests that the solution won’t necessarily be permanent and will increase the probability the other person will agree to try the solution.

The other person’s buy-in (it was their solution after all)

By causing the other person to generate the list of possible solutions, you will increase the likelihood that he or she will feel “buy-in” to the possible solution. He or she was the one who generated the solution and in following up later, you can honestly say that this was a solution that he or she generated.

Putting it all together

Putting the four steps together will consist merely of two statements and two questions on your part:

Step 1: “I noticed that ____ has happened.”

Step 2: “I have to tell you, I feel _____ when that happens.”

Step 3: “What’s causing that to happen?”

Step 4: “How can we not have that in the future?”

Avoid justifying your emotion or adding any more to these statements than necessary. Adding more language may cause the other person to feel as if he or she is being lectured to. Adding more language can also increase the possibility you’ll touch on a “verbal land mine” or sensitive area for the other person. Keep it short, sweet, and focus most of your time and effort on listening to the other person and in generating possible solutions.

Follow up

Once the proposed solution has been generated and a reasonable time has passed for implementation, follow-up with the other person to see if the solution is working for him or her as well. Your goal all along in this process was not so much to cause the behavior you found objectionable to stop, but rather to arrive at a cooperative resolution that will create a better outcome for both you and the other person.

This four-step process will not guarantee you will always get your way. It will greatly increase the probability of a constructive outcome to many of your conflicts. The goal is not to win the battle but to preserve the relationship so future differences will be more easily managed. With this four-step process, you can be at your best even when others are at their worst.