



# USA Funds University

## Effective Internal Campus Communications

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## Special Note

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# Communication Skills

What does it mean to communicate?

The Merriam-Webster *Dictionary* defines communication as “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior; exchange of information; personal rapport.”

List examples of personal situations where you experienced excellent and poor communication — as the speaker or as the listener — and the results:

	Personal Example	Results
Excellent Communication		
Poor Communication		

## Communication is important because:

- ◆ It can affect other people positively or negatively.
- ◆ It can lead to understanding — or misunderstanding.
- ◆ It can address and resolve problems or it can create more problems.
- ◆ It can improve and energize workflow and performance or it can create breakdowns and diminish performance.
- ◆ It can promote teamwork or generate lack of trust.
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Communication is much more comprehensive than simply the words that we speak. The human mind collects all sorts of information during the communication process — true for everyone involved in the communication. We're thinking about what we're going to say, we're attempting to organize our communication so that it makes sense, and we're interpreting the reaction of the listener(s). Remember that the listeners are doing all of these same things too.

How often do we accidentally talk above the knowledge level of our listener? Perhaps we don't remember to explain an acronym or abbreviation that we're using. We also have to remember that some acronyms are the standard in the financial aid world. For example, FAFSA is the accepted standard and to spell it out when speaking — Free Application for Federal Student Aid — might be awkward and create confusion. Or, another example, COA, might not be easily understood by the new financial aid administrator unless you spell it out — Cost of Attendance.

Also be aware of your underlying feelings and intent because they will come through when you communicate. If your intent or feelings are not appropriate to the situation, adjusting your attitude will enhance the communication.

How often do we explain a process to co-workers or students and get the feeling they are not hearing and are not taking notes? How do you ensure that they walk out the door or hang up the phone, knowing exactly what to do next?

When you listen with the best intentions, your skills matter less than your attitude. Ask yourself: "Am I willing to be influenced? Am I open to learning?" You don't have to believe everything you hear, but try to suspend disbelief.

Non-verbal communication also can send mixed messages to students and co-workers. Check with someone you trust to get feedback on how you appear when you're attentively listening to someone or when a conversation becomes more difficult.

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# Types of Communication

## Verbal Communication

### Clarity

Be sure to carefully enunciate your words and don't run them together. Pronouncing your words correctly is critical for another person's understanding. Also, work to eliminate filler words, such as "uh," "um," or "you know."

### Pace

Don't speak too quickly or too slowly. You need to be sure the listener can hear and understand what you are saying. Occasional pauses may add emphasis to important points. Pay attention to the pace of the people communicating with you. Do they speak very quickly or more slowly? Adjusting your pace to more closely resemble theirs will make them more comfortable in the conversation.

### Tone

Use the appropriate volume based on the room size and background noise; be pleasant, friendly and keep interest in your voice. If you are having a bad day, check yourself by paying attention to how you sound. You might consider asking a co-worker to help you identify any negative sounding communication.

## Listening

### Focus

Concentrate on the other person. Avoid other distractions, such as the telephone, e-mail and other conversations around you. Communicate "tell me more" non-verbally and don't interrupt.

### Hear

Stay focused on what you're hearing instead of thinking about the next thing to say. Watch body language to try to determine what is "not being said" so you fully understand. Listen for purpose — what is the other person trying to achieve?

### Comprehend

Concentrate on active listening. Check to see if there is clear understanding on both sides by paraphrasing back to the person what you've heard. Give outward signs that you're understanding the other person, such as nodding and maintaining eye contact. Always ask relevant questions to clarify when you're unsure.

## Non-Verbal Communication

### Body Language

Be aware of negative body language:

- ♦ Crossed arms might be interpreted as creating distance or blocking communication.
- ♦ Tapping foot, drumming your fingers or pen clicking could mean "hurry up!"
- ♦ Poor posture or slouching could give the impression that you are uncomfortable, lack confidence or are bored.
- ♦ Shrugging shoulders could mean a variety of things and not be a clear indication of anything.

### Facial Expressions

Common non-verbal facial gestures can often accent what is being said or give clues to a listener's understanding:

- ♦ Frowns/smiles.
- ♦ Raised eyebrows.
- ♦ Shaking/nodding head.
- ♦ Rolling eyes.
- ♦ Winking.

### Animation

The level of animation can be tricky.

- ♦ Lack of expression could make a person seem depressed or very difficult to engage.
- ♦ Tailor your style to the situation — too many smiles or being too perky when discussing a serious problem with someone can be interpreted as insincere or out of touch with the situation.

# Effective Workplace Communication

## Common Guidelines

- ♦ Define the most important points to communicate. Think through what information you need to convey and what information you need in response. What is the best form of communication to use — verbal, e-mail, body language?
- ♦ Is the timing right? This question is one we need to ask ourselves any time we have a topic that is important and we want to secure input from others. Is the listener able to give you the attention that you need so you can secure answers and move on?
- ♦ Define clear objectives for your communication. You might ask yourself, "What is the purpose of this communication? What information do I need to share to get the answers I need?"

## Characteristics of Effective Workplace Communication

### Business Focus

In a workplace communication, a business focus inspires or provides a framework for the communication. This focus is a launching pad for the exchange. It propels the conversation or written communication toward the business needs, goals and objectives.

One technique for discerning what has a business focus is to ask yourself, "Is this information need to know, nice to know, or don't need to know?"

Need-to-know information could be regarded as having a performance impact. Interestingly, included in this category is information that is not necessarily central to performing the task or accomplishing the objective, but which provides information on why the action is important. Consider that any employee may accomplish tasks in ignorance of why they are important. Employees who understand how important their work is to a larger objective, however, are much more likely to be motivated by this larger sense of accomplishment. To that extent, information that provides a context and clear purpose for the work or task is a "need-to-know."

Nice-to-know information might be that which is potentially useful at some point in the future, but perhaps not now. Nice-to-know information may influence decisions, provide relevant background or give additional context. There is no formula that will tell you when "nice-to-know" information should be included in an exchange, but it is helpful to understand this distinction, and gauge your actions accordingly.

Don't-need-to-know could be regarded as irrelevant information. It often is considered "noise" or "distraction" or "information overload." Remember that too much information can create confusion, keeping your communication from being effective or achieving the desired results.

### Clear Outcomes

Related to business focus is the notion of clear outcomes. What needs to be accomplished? What decisions need to be reached? What additional information is necessary to move the issue forward?

Financial aid administration rarely is simple, but it is important to keep messages discreet and clearly connected to an outcome. Loading up a communication with many different messages can be confusing or overwhelming. And, your true message may be lost in the process. So, keep your communication tied to one or two clear outcomes.

### Mutual Respect

Another crucial component of any form of communication is "mutual respect." Work on your internal attitude. Learn to respect the other person and be open to new ideas. This will encourage an atmosphere where you earn the respect of the other person.

One common form of disrespect is discounting someone's idea or opinion. You've heard someone say, "I think that's a great idea, but I think we should..." That "but" negates everything that came before it. A more respectful way to communicate the thought is to use "and" instead. For example, "I think that's a great idea, and I'd like to add to your idea with some thoughts of my own, if I may."

Also, remember that disagreeing with an idea or believing the work quality needs improving is different from judging the whole person based on his or her ideas. The first offers constructive feedback; the second opens the door to defensiveness, counterattack or ends the communication completely.

## Directness

If respect is present, it makes it infinitely easier to engage the fourth aspect of excellent workplace communication — directness. Directness means being clear or specific. Being direct significantly increases the chances that the other party will have a clear understanding of the point being made.

One way to demonstrate directness is to learn the difference between two opposite ways of communicating — telling and asking. The best interactions result from a balanced combination of both.

Telling is communicating by expressing your opinion, discussing facts that interest you, making your needs known or advocating for your position.

Asking is an approach based on inquiry — asking the other person questions. This method can be used when you are asking for clarification, trying to understand the other person's line of reasoning or point of view, seeking information or testing your own generalizations or conclusions.

Another way to demonstrate directness is to use "I" statements. "I" statements make it easier to take responsibility for your own opinions and emotions, and make it harder to accuse or blame the other person. When you use "I" statements, you are acknowledging your opinions and perspectives as your own, not as fact. In many situations there are three perspectives — my truth, your truth and the truth.

For example, the statement "I believe that we're going to miss the deadline," is more direct than "It is clear that we're going to miss the deadline." The first statement more accurately represents your truth. The second statement has an underlying, but not spoken, assumption. In the second statement, "It is clear that we're going to miss the deadline," the speaker assumes that the fact is clear to everyone, and that it is the truth. The problem with such a statement is the defensiveness that can occur in someone who does not see the situation in the same way.

A final way to demonstrate directness is to form statements as statements, not as leading questions. How often have you heard someone start off a statement with, "Don't you think...?" By opening in that manner, the listener often feels forced to agree with the speaker. Some listeners will resent the set-up and become defensive. They may even try to disagree on purpose because of their resentment.

Remember that being too direct also can have a negative impact. Some people are so direct that they come across as curt or angry. This too can put the listener on the defensive.

## Tolerance of Other Communication Styles

Related to respect is the tolerance of other communication styles. All individuals have different ways of communicating. The challenge in the workplace is accepting a communication style that is different from your own and learning from this difference.

We see this diversity in many areas of our lives. Maybe you even experienced this challenge as you were driving to work this morning. All people drive differently. And, perhaps from our individual perspective, "anyone who drives faster than me is crazy; anyone who drives slower than me is an idiot." What does that do? It positions you as the baseline. And anyone who drives faster or slower than you is driving poorly. The same could hold true for communication. We may view our way of communicating as the one, right, best way. And, anyone who communicates differently than us is communicating poorly.

To one degree or another, we all have a view of the world and of other people, and how communication and behavior in general should unfold. Usually, this view positions us as the baseline. We can unconsciously assume that others should communicate the same way we do. While this may be personally comfortable for us, it is not realistic. The challenge is to consider the other person as the baseline and to tailor your style to that norm. Be willing to learn the differences in how they see the world, learn their lines of logic and open up to a different way of thinking.

## Timeliness

Timeliness is another characteristic related to effective workplace communication. Timeliness reduces the possibility for incorrect or ineffective actions impacting the workplace. For example, although each of us might mentor another person about the value of working on a project in small pieces so that the ultimate deadline can be met, it's likely that we often don't end up handling projects in that way. Other critical things come first or a crisis happens and our plan for working on the project over time doesn't happen. Then we find ourselves working at the last minute, often late the night before, trying to pull it all together. Has this ever happened to you?

Timeliness also can demonstrate respect for co-workers, particularly when you are asked to work on a team or provide feedback on a project. If you are late in responding, you may be sending the message that your time is more important than that of your colleagues.

## Focused Listening

A final characteristic we need to consider is focused listening. Focused listening means temporarily suspending our own views, opinions and facts while listening to the whole message of the other person. It can be very hard to do this, if you start naturally projecting your own reactions to what is being said.

Try to stay as focused as possible on the immediate moment. Do not let the past or the future enter into the communication. Force yourself to stay open to whatever is being said and listen all the way through. Trying to "hear" what is being said from the perspective of the other person will help you stay centered in the present moment. And it will help you be more objective in handling your response.

## Putting It All Together — The Three-Step Process for Effective Communication

Three-Step Process	"I" Statements	Telling vs. Asking	Characteristics
1. Explain your observation, using objective facts. Describe your feelings.	When you _____ I feel _____ because _____.	Tell	Business Focus. Directness. Timeliness.
2. State what you would like to be different in the future.	What I'd like is _____.	Tell	Business Focus. Clear Outcomes. Mutual Respect. Directness. Tolerance. Timeliness.
3. Inquire how this makes the other person feel.	How would that work for you?	Ask	Mutual Respect. Directness. Tolerance. Timeliness. Focused Listening.

## The Three-Step Process for Effective Communication

### The Bottom Line

Lasting impressions are formed within the first five seconds of meeting someone.

Be honest with people. Sometimes we can't understand another person. When that happens, don't fake thinking it will get clearer as the conversation goes along. Give it a few sentences and if you do not understand, ask for clarity.

Adding a smile makes a tense situation more comfortable.

Be aware of cultural differences. If English is not the listener's first language, make sure that you clearly identify any information you are sharing. Break it down so that it is more easily understood. Don't add big words to the conversation.

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# Putting It To Work

The topics covered in this training session are conveyed in general terms to encompass learners from all types of postsecondary institutions. You should consider how the concepts covered in the training session apply to your school.

Schools often are given flexibility in administering and applying guidelines to certain federal student aid programs. That's why it is essential that you discuss these items (shown below) with your supervisor.

Your supervisor can give you institution-specific guidelines on how the material we discussed in this training session can be applied to your job.

1. In what situations would it be helpful to use careful, intentional communication skills?

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2. Which skills do you think will be most helpful to you?

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3. What one skill will you try to incorporate now?

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## References

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