



Coming Back Together: Effective Communication

Returning to campus life this Fall will be challenging, but like any challenge, it presents opportunities to develop and strengthen skills. Our new reality will place a premium on communication skills and the ability to adapt to a changing landscape. While we may look for consistency and clarity, an honest recognition of the turbulence we are faced with is the first step in moving forward as a new workplace evolves.

The following are tips for all employees looking to refine their communication skills:

1. **Acknowledge uncertainty** – It may feel like we need to quickly set new expectations, but the reality is that Covid is evolving and requires nimble responses. Don't be afraid to state that you simply don't know an answer. Remember that upheaval can lead to an over-compensation, wanting answers that just aren't there. Develop your ability to sit with tension. Take a deep breath before you respond.
2. **Validate emotions** – When we can't give answers, at least we can validate others' emotional experiences. We don't need to solve for emotions but rather to sit with them. For example, managers might be faced with resentment when they aren't able to grant some of the flexible work arrangements employees might want. For all employees, basic validating responses can be simple but effective. Statements like, "I can hear that this is difficult for you" or "I can hear that you have strong emotions about this" can prove effective. Brief, consistent verbal prompts like these can take some of the guesswork out of responding and help us to stick to limits that need to be set while acknowledging that these limits might be difficult.
3. **Set clear expectations** – Anticipate some of the challenges and areas of conflict before they are expressed. Perhaps you have never had to come to a meeting with an agenda and have relied on your ability to wing it. Even if this is your preferred style, consider things like setting advance agendas to keep discussions on track.
4. **Develop assertive communication skills** – Using "I statements" is the most basic part of assertive communication. Upheaval often puts people in more emotional states, and the tendency is to blame or talk about the other and their responsibility for whatever is wrong. Assertiveness involves owning our part of a difficult communication and expressing what is within our control. Assertive communication does not always lead to agreement, but it does foster greater understanding. Using reflective statements helps others feel that they are truly heard.
5. **Put a premium on self-care** – In more predictable times, we might do our self-care and responses to stress in a less mindful manner. Turbulent times challenge us to be more planned in the things we do to deal with anxiety. We all have good skills; it's typically anxiety that is the obstacle to accessing them. Doing things to manage baseline anxiety naturally facilitates our best communication. The basics of self-care are adequate sleep, healthy diet, and a good level of physical activity. When you're anticipating a difficult communication, be more planful in doing good self-care in advance of the exchange to bring down baseline anxiety and boost your confidence.



6. **Seek out feedback** – Really remind yourself that this is a whole new world and understand that things you've said previously may land very differently now. Consistently ask for feedback, especially from those with whom you're having a difficult communication. Understand that feedback might seem more threatening now, but it's still vital in keeping good communication going.
7. **Vent when you need to** – Venting is the blowing off steam type of communication that we all do. The goal here is to discharge negative emotions without an eye towards problem-solving. Don't over-indulge venting. More than a few minutes of venting typically crosses over into less helpful complaining. Guide yourself to move on to problem-solving when it's time.

On-campus resources are available. Consider talking to an EAP counselor as you navigate your new workplace and further develop all of your communication skills.