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# Open Communication

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fletcher  
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## Open Communication

Open communication introduces the practice of mutually beneficial honest communication which is a higher form of communication-based on active listening, trust, and mutual respect. This doesn't just refer to discussions, meetings, and keeping team members appraised on important matters but also to sharing fears and seeking counselling from team members. It means building trust by establishing a friendly, supportive rapport with team members and by showing concern. This step discusses open communication, genuine conversations, active listening, conflict management and how to be a good communicator.

High-performance leadership indulges in communication that is based on a transparent and open communication framework of honesty, directness, and frankness, characterized by sharing of experiences, trust and a willingness to embrace conflict and collaborative problem-solving. It engages team members to discover newer or improved ways of reaching goals and prevents groupthink whilst spurning innovation.

Communication is the basis of all healthy relationships, including the one between a team member and a manager. For example, team members whose managers hold regular meetings with them are almost three times as likely to be engaged as team members whose managers do not hold regular meetings with them. Engagement is highest among team members who have some form (face to face, phone or digital) of daily communication with their managers. And when team members attempt to contact their manager, engaged team members report their manager returns their calls or messages within 24 hours.

Team members need to be encouraged to accept critical feedback and provide constructive input to others. Feedback should answer questions, provide solutions, or help strengthen the task or project at hand. You cannot have a high-performance team without strong relationships and genuine communication. The two traits are closely linked.

These traits are essential for high performance teams because without honest communication and the strength of the relationships that follow, it becomes near impossible to fix problems with performance. Strong and open relationships allow team members to talk honestly about successes and failures, areas for improvements and without fear of animosity. Open communication requires a free flow of information, a shared agreement that no subject is off-limits, and frequent and respectful interactions among team members and other individuals in the organization.

## Genuine conversations

High-performance leadership calls for genuine conversations which are conversations about performance, with the intent of helping team members to improve. It takes time and much effort to develop an environment of mutual trust and respect that creates a safe environment for genuine conversations. This can be a daunting process for some, but once you are comfortable with genuine conversations, you will never regret it helped by shifting your perception to a view that the conversation is about caring for your team member and helping them to improve, the process becomes second nature. The ability to have genuine conversations is what builds strong relationships, and the stronger your relationships the more open communication becomes. This is important as high-performance teams seek more outside connections which enhances their creativity and innovation satisfying their need for fresh perspectives and information.

There is no such thing as a high-performance team without strong relationships and genuine communication. The two attributes are closely linked. The ability to have genuine conversations is what builds strong relationships, and the stronger your relationships the more genuine your communications will become.

## Listening

There are various types of listening with Active Listening being the most superior.

### 1. Competitive.

This type of listening is when people (sometimes aggressively) push their own views or opinions rather than listen to someone else's. When we listen this way, we are mainly waiting to jump in and say something or point out a flaw in what the other person is saying. We are pretending that we are listening when we are thinking about and formulating our thoughts and ideas and are just waiting for an opportunity to blurt them out. Unfortunately, there are two significant downsides here, the first is that we fail to take in what the other person is saying, having closed our minds, and the second is that when we interrupt, it is nearly always the case that the most important thing the other person is about to say, gets cut off.

### 2. Passive.

With this type of listening, we are genuinely interested in what the other person is trying to say. We are listening intently, not responding or being involved, understanding the points that the other person is trying to make. We may agree with what is being said, but we are doing so in a passive manner rather than in a competitive one.

### 3. Active.

This is the most superior form of listening, active listening means paying close attention to who you're communicating with by engaging with them, asking questions, rephrasing, and providing feedback on what is being said. Practicing active listening builds respect with the other person. Active listening requires you to fully concentrate, understand, respond to and then remember what is being said to you. You need to make a conscious effort to hear and understand the complete message being spoken, rather than just passively hearing the message of the speaker.

When you actively listen, you understand what the other person is saying. It requires listening to what the other person says before interrupting and sharing your thoughts. When you actively listen, you paraphrase what the other person is speaking as a way of playing it back to them to show that you have heard them, restating what the other person has said shows that you are actively engaged.

You also don't miss critical information (which you always miss when you interrupt), it helps build trust and connections, identify, and solve problems and it increases your knowledge and understanding of the subject matter being listened to. You can also understand more by being non-judgmental, giving your undivided attention and using silences effectively.

Active listening means not engaging in unhelpful listening habits such as:

- Not showing respect for the speaker.
- Not hearing underlying meaning.
- Rushing the other person.
- Becoming distracted.
- Forgetting what was said in the past.
- Asking about unimportant details.
- Focusing too much on details and missing the big picture.
- Ignoring what you don't understand.
- Only pretending to pay attention.

### **How to practice active listening**

1. Shut down your internal dialogue while listening. Avoid daydreaming. It is impossible to attentively listen to someone else and your inner voice at the same time. Be open, neutral, and withhold judgment while listening. Be patient while you listen. We can listen much faster than others can speak.
2. Don't interrupt while the other person is speaking. Likewise, do not prepare your reply while the other person speaks; the last thing that he or she says may change

the meaning of what has already been said. If you have trouble listening without interruption, try using the index finger of one hand to draw a letter L (for listen) on the palm of your other hand.

3. If you believe you already know what a team member is thinking, then you're not ready to have a conversation, instead, adopt a learning mindset, knowing (for a fact) that there is something new to learn and that you don't have all the facts.
4. Make eye contact while the other person speaks. If you find this difficult, look at the space between a person's eyes just above the top of their nose; to them, it appears that you are looking directly into their eyes.
5. Use brief verbal affirmations like "I see," "I know," "Sure," "Thank you," or "I understand".
6. Paraphrase what has been said, rather than offering unsolicited advice or opinions. For example, you might start this off by saying, "In other words, what you are saying is...".
7. Watch non-verbal behaviour to pick up on any hidden meanings. For example, facial expressions, tone of voice, and other behaviours can sometimes tell you more than words alone.
8. Show interest by asking questions to clarify what is said. Ask open-ended questions to encourage the speaker. Avoid closed yes-or-no questions that tend to shut down the conversation.
9. Avoid distractions like holding or looking at a cell phone.

### **Conflict management**

Conflict thwarts many things but especially open communication, but when conflict is managed correctly it becomes a higher, more sophisticated form of communication. Conflict is unavoidable, but a clash of ideas can be the beginning of innovative thinking. Conflict is not necessarily destructive; when managed properly, conflict can result in significant benefits for a team. This is done by having team members focus on deriving value from their differences which results in arriving at better decisions, innovation, and creativity. Conflicts are opportunities than can shift team members focus from the points of variations to new possibilities and synergies.

"Conflict is inevitable ... in fact, to achieve synergistic solutions, a variety of ideas and approaches are needed. These are the ingredients for conflict. Conflict needs to be managed constructively and professionally as when appropriately harnessed it is a very positive thing. Did you know that a clash of ideas can be the beginning of innovative thinking whilst being overly dominant with your ideas; is being selfish and diminishes creative thinking. You must learn how to settle and decide between competing ideas by using both conflict and competitive thinking to your advantage." Susan Gerke, IBM, Leadership Development.

## Management Guide

One of the central differences between an ordinary team and a high-performance team is the capability to handle conflict in a constructive way. Any conflicts that surface must be depersonalized and dealt with early, either between individuals or among the collective team. Instead of viewing conflict as a negative, a high-performance leader understands that conflict fosters a deeper understanding of task issues and views it as a strength of the collective group. Diverse views help improve thinking, learning, problem-solving, decision-making, generating ideas and overall performance. Embrace conflict, don't avoid it. High-performance managers recognize that conflict is a natural consequence of healthy collaboration.

With psychological safety in place, healthy conflict will thrive and become an essential element that does not allow groupthink to take root which only serves to kill off innovation and creativity. If the team does not have diversity of thought or individuals do not feel safe to dissent, productivity will also be stunted and the status quo will be maintained, making real progress and higher performance impossible.

“Being able to question things in a constructive way will make the outcome stronger and more inclusive.” Rebecca Baumgartner, Ogletree Deakins

High-performance managers do not allow grudges to build up and destroy team morale, they also replace blame with curiosity and autopsy. If team members sense that blame or criticism is being assigned, this leads to defensiveness and then to disengagement. High-performance leadership is about having team members settling and deciding between competing ideas noting that no team can progress until all team members believe they have a voice that is heard. Conflict arises from differences, and when individuals come together in teams, their differences in power, values and attitudes contribute to the creation of conflict.

Says Keith Ferrazzi, CEO of Consulting firm Ferrazzi Greenlight. “Ideas do not progress when conversations are too polite, people are not challenged, ideas are not questioned. A lack of candour will inevitably diminish decision making, creating a hierarchical culture where people only speak their minds in private.” The firm studied 50 large companies and found the highest-performing teams were the most forthright.

To avoid the negative consequences that can result from disagreements, hold over resolution of issues and disagreements until your next team meeting, where the whole team can be involved. At the next team meeting have the team members with opposing views debate their cases in front of the whole team, have them answer any clarifying

questions. Ask the team members to actively listen to the debate and to look out for new opportunities. Resolve the conflict using a decision-making process or use a majority vote. Where a decision-making process is called for, proceed as follows:

1. Identify the issue and decision needed. Clearly define the nature and type of the decision that needs to be made. This first step is very important.
2. Gather relevant information. Collect pertinent information relating to the decision and its outcomes. Think about what information is needed, the best sources of that information, and how to get it.
3. Identify alternatives. As you collect information, identify the possible paths of action or alternatives. You can also use your imagination and additional information to construct new alternatives. In this step, list all possible options.
4. Weigh the evidence. Consider each option and think through what is required to carry it out. Next, evaluate whether the need identified in 2 would be met or resolved using each option. As you go through this complex process, some options will begin to stand out, those are the ones that seem to have the best chance of achieving your goal. Prioritise the alternatives based upon your value system and chance of achieving them.
5. Choose among alternatives. Once you have considered all the evidence, you can select the best alternative that seems to fit best with the desired goal. You may even choose a combination of other options and merge them together to form the best alternative.
6. Act. Now do the planning to implement the chosen alternative.
7. Review your decision & its consequences. Finally consider the results and outcomes of your decision and evaluate whether it has resolved the need you identified in 2. If not, you might want to gather more detailed information or explore additional alternatives.

“In surveys of European and American executives, fully 85 per cent of them acknowledged that they had issues or concerns at work that they were afraid to raise. Afraid of the conflict that would provoke, afraid to get embroiled in arguments that they did not know how to manage and felt that they were bound to lose. So how do we develop the skills that we need? Because it does take skill and practice, too. If we aren't going to be afraid of conflict, we have to see it as thinking, and then we have to get really good at it”. Margaret Heffernan.

## How to be a good communicator

Communication is not a one-person show and high-performance leadership means being an excellent communicator, ensuring that the right message reaches the right person in the right way at the right time. Here are tips on being a good communicator:

### 1. Before speaking, consider.

1. Rehearsing in your head the message you want to tell.
2. Putting yourself in the other person's shoes, how will they interpret the message?
3. Is the message clear, concise, and unlikely to be misinterpreted?
4. If it is misinterpreted, how can you rephrase it?
5. Practice active listening, that is, concentrate on what you are hearing. What is it the other person is trying to tell you?
6. Often if someone has a difficult thing to say to you, they will disguise it, not be clear or concise, be on the lookout for this.
7. If the message (such as an employee's termination) is sensitive or unpleasant, prepare a bulleted script for yourself to follow and stick to it.
8. Be frank, direct, open, and honest; the other person will pick this up and be reassured by it. It's a matter of not what you have to say, but rather how you say it.
9. Check that your messages have been received by asking the team member to playback to you their understanding of what you have said.
10. Look directly at the team member in the eyes. To do this and maintain a stare, look just above the bridge of their nose, between their eyes. This allows you to maintain a direct look for as long as you want. To the team member it appears as if you are looking directly into their eyes. This is an especially effective tactic for negotiations and when delivering bad news, it gives you the upper hand.

## Summary

1. **Open communication.** - Means practising mutually beneficial honest communication which is a higher form of communication-based on listening, trust, and mutual respect. This doesn't just refer to discussions, meetings, and keeping team members apprised on important matters but also to sharing fears and seeking counselling from team members. It means building trust by actively listening to whom you are speaking by establishing a friendly, supportive rapport and by showing concern. This step discusses open communication, genuine conversations, active listening, and conflict management.
2. **Genuine conversations.** - High-performance leadership calls for genuine conversations which are conversations about performance, with the intent of helping team members to improve. It takes time and effort to develop an



environment of mutual trust and respect that creates a safe environment for genuine conversations. This can be a daunting process for some, but once you are comfortable with genuine conversations, you will never regret it helped by shifting your perception to a view that the conversation is about caring for your team member and helping them to improve, the process becomes second nature. The ability to have genuine conversations is what builds strong relationships, and the stronger your relationships the more genuine your communication will become.

3. **Active listening.** - This is the most superior form of listening, active listening means paying close attention to who you're communicating with by engaging with them, asking questions, rephrasing, and providing feedback on what is being said. Practicing active listening builds respect with the other person. Active listening requires you to fully concentrate, understand, respond to, and then remember what is being said to you. You need to make a conscious effort to hear and understand the complete message being spoken, rather than just passively hearing the message of the speaker.
4. **How to practice active listening.** - Shut down your internal dialogue while listening. Don't interrupt, make eye contact, use brief verbal affirmations, paraphrase, watch for non-verbal behaviour, show interest, and avoid distractions.
5. **Conflict management.** - Conflict thwarts many things but especially open communication, but when conflict is managed correctly it becomes a higher, more sophisticated form of communication. Conflict is unavoidable, but a clash of ideas can be the beginning of innovative thinking. Conflict is not necessarily destructive; when managed properly, conflict can result in significant benefits for a team. This is done by having team members focus on deriving value from their differences which results in arriving at better decisions. innovation and creativity. Conflicts are opportunities than can shift team members focus from the points of variations to new possibilities and synergies.
6. **Use a formal problem-solving approach.** - Identify the issue and decision needed, gather relevant information, identify alternatives, weigh the evidence, prioritise the alternatives, choose among alternatives, act, review your decision & its consequences. Finally consider the results and outcomes of your decision and evaluate whether it has resolved
7. **How to be a good communicator.** - Communication is not a one-person show and high-performance leadership means being an excellent communicator, ensuring that the right message reaches the right person in the right way at the right time. Before speaking, consider: - Rehearsing in your head the message you want to tell, putting yourself in the other person's shoes, how will they interpret the message? is the message clear, concise, and unlikely to be misinterpreted?

<b>Open Communication Workshop</b>	<b>2.0 hours</b>
Arrange a team workshop.	
Create a handout. 1. Use the notes from this step as a Handout.	
Discuss open communication. 2. Discuss what Open Communication means and how it looks in practice. 3. Open communication is based on a transparent communication framework of honesty, directness, and frankness, characterized by sharing of experiences, trust and a willingness to embrace conflict and collaborative problem-solving. Team members need to be encouraged to accept critical feedback and provide constructive input to others.	15 minutes
Discuss genuine conversation. 4. Discuss what a Genuine Conversation is and how it relates to the team members. 5. Genuine conversations are conversations about performance, with the intent of helping team members to improve. It takes time and much effort to develop an environment of mutual trust and respect that creates a safe environment for genuine conversations.	15 minutes
Discuss Active Listening. 6. Discuss the practice of Active Listening and how it needs to become a normalised behaviour. 7. Active listening means paying close attention to who you're communicating with by engaging with them, asking questions, rephrasing, and providing feedback on what is being said. Active listening builds respect with the other person but requires you to fully concentrate, understand, respond to and then remember what is being said.	20 minutes
Discuss Conflict Management. 8. Discuss how conflicts will be managed and how they can be used in a positive way. 9. Conflict thwarts many things but especially open communication, but when conflict is managed correctly it becomes a higher, more sophisticated form of communication. Conflict is unavoidable, but a clash of ideas can be the beginning of innovative thinking. Conflict is not necessarily destructive; when managed properly, conflict can result in significant benefits for a team.	20 minutes
Discuss Good Communication. 10. Discuss how to be a good communicator.	20 minutes

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11. Consider rehearsing in your head the message you want to tell and putting yourself in the other person's shoes, thinking about how they will interpret the message. Making sure that the message clear, concise, and unlikely to be misinterpreted?	
Close the workshop. 12. Ask for any questions or if anything needs to be clarified. 13. Arrange for a copy of the team rules to be made accessible to everyone.	10 minutes

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