


Self-reflection theme: Interpersonal communication



Understanding The 4 Communication Styles in the Workplace

How to improve yours and navigate others

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We encounter a ton of different personalities at work. Some are easy to get along with; whereas, others are harder to vibe with. How well we're able to work with people often depends on our workplace communication style.

So, what exactly is a workplace communication style? Your workplace communication style is the manner in which you share ideas, information, and issues in a professional setting. A combination of verbal and [nonverbal](#) cues, it affects how you interact, learn, share, and collaborate.¹

Research shows that effective and appropriate communication is linked to greater productivity, better organizational health, and increased employee satisfaction.² How we communicate can also play a huge role in determining our personal and professional growth and success.³

Our communication style is based on our unique characteristics, which drive our approach to sharing and exchanging information with others, says Octavia Goredema, a career coach and author of “Prep, Push, Pivot.”

“Identifying your communication style will allow you to enhance your interactions with others and play an important role in building your personal brand.” — **OCTAVIA GOREDEMA, CAREER COACH**

Apart from defining your own communication style, it's also important to recognize other people's communication styles. This is crucial because we all have different ways of interacting, processing, and conveying information, says Goredema. If you can recognize the differences, you can use your [emotional intelligence](#) to adapt to the needs and preferences of others, she adds.

Keep reading to explore passive, passive-aggressive, aggressive, and assertive workplace communication styles.

Passive Communication Style

These are some of the characteristics of a [passive](#) workplace communication style:

- **Reluctance to speak up:** Someone with a passive workplace communication style may hesitate to express their thoughts, opinions, ideas, and needs. Instead of speaking up, they may wait for others to take the lead.
- **Conflict avoidance:** Passive communicators often go to great lengths to [avoid conflicts](#) or disagreements. They may choose not to give others feedback or address issues directly.

- **Difficulty setting boundaries:** They may find it difficult to decline requests or express their own limitations. They might agree to tasks or responsibilities they are uncomfortable with because they are unable to say “no.”
- **Indirect communication:** They may use indirect language or non-verbal cues to convey their thoughts or emotions, which can sometimes cause misunderstandings and confusion.
- **Low self-confidence:** A passive communication style often stems from a lack of self-confidence. The person may doubt their own abilities, which can prevent them from expressing themselves openly. They may [fear rejection](#), so they may hold back their ideas or opinions.

You may choose to remain passive in situations where you have little interest or involvement.⁴ However, in other situations a passive communication style may be ineffective and a more assertive communication style may be required.

What to Do If You're a Passive Communicator

If you're a passive communicator, these are some strategies that can help you [be more assertive](#):

- **Define your goals:** Set specific communication goals for yourself. Whether it's speaking up in meetings, asking for help when needed, or providing honest feedback, having clear objectives can be helpful.
- **Practice assertive language:** Use clear, concise, and direct language to express your thoughts and ideas. Avoid overly apologetic or overly deferential language that can weaken your message.
- **Rehearse what you want to say:** If you find it difficult to be spontaneously assertive, it can be helpful to prepare what you want to say in advance. Rehearsing it can boost your confidence and help you feel more in control.
- **Set boundaries:** Clearly communicate your boundaries to colleagues and supervisors. Learn to politely but firmly [say "no"](#) when you genuinely can't take on additional tasks or commitments.
- **Remind yourself of your qualifications:** If you feel shy or timid, or worry that others won't value your ideas, career coach [Krystin Morgan](#) recommends reminding yourself of your credentials and accomplishments. “Remember that you deserve to have a seat at the table and share your opinion.”

How to Interact With a Passive Communicator

These are some strategies that can help you interact with a passive communicator:

- **Include them in discussions:** If someone rarely speaks up or shares their thoughts, Morgan recommends making space for them to engage in the conversation. “For instance, in a group setting, this could mean asking the person for their thoughts or ideas.”
- **Consider alternative forms of communication:** Some people feel intimidated by large groups and communicate better one-on-one instead, says Morgan. Others prefer written communication and may be more willing to share their thoughts over email.
- **Offer reassurance:** Assure the person that their thoughts and opinions are valued and respected. Show appreciation for their ideas and contributions.
- **Be approachable:** Create a dynamic where the person feels comfortable approaching you. Be friendly, open, and [non-judgmental](#) in your interactions.
- **Avoid pressuring them:** While you want to encourage them to speak up, avoid putting them on the spot or pressuring them to talk.

Aggressive Communication Style

These are some of the characteristics of an [aggressive](#) workplace communication style:

- **Dominance:** People who communicate aggressively tend to try and control conversations and situations. They may interrupt others, raise their voice unnecessarily, or use forceful body language to assert dominance.
- **Bluntness:** Aggressive communicators may be blunt and direct in their communication, sometimes to the point of being rude or tactless.
- **Disregard for boundaries:** They may ignore personal or professional [boundaries](#), which can be inappropriate and uncomfortable.
- **Resistance to compromise:** They may resist compromise and aggressively try to put their point across or ensure things are done their way.
- **Personal attacks:** This communication style can involve insults, personal attacks, or name-calling. The person may attack someone's character or abilities in an attempt to assert their own [superiority](#). In turn, they may be defensive when questioned or challenged.

Research shows that men who are aggressive communicators are often lauded for vigorously pursuing their goals; whereas, women who are aggressive communicators are regarded more negatively.⁴

What to Do If You're an Aggressive Communicator

If you're an aggressive communicator, these are some strategies that can help you be more respectful of others in the workplace:

- **Identify your triggers:** Identify what [triggers](#) your aggressive responses. Understand the underlying emotions or situations that cause you to respond aggressively. Keeping a journal can help you track and manage your triggers and responses.
- **Pause before you respond:** When you feel the urge to respond aggressively, pause and take a deep breath. This brief moment can help you collect your thoughts and respond more calmly.
- **Choose your words carefully:** Pay attention to your choice of words. Use respectful language that reflects a willingness to collaborate and engage in a positive discussion. Practicing or role-playing important discussions in advance can help you be more calm and composed in the moment.
- **Practice empathy:** Put yourself in the other person's shoes and consider their perspective. This can help you understand their feelings and [be more empathetic](#) toward them.
- **Apologize and make amends:** If you've acted aggressively toward someone in your workplace in the past, acknowledge your behavior and apologize to them.

How to Interact With an Aggressive Communicator

These are some strategies that can help you interact with an [aggressive](#) communicator:

- **Remain calm:** Though it can be difficult in the moment, it's important to stay calm and composed when faced with aggression. Responding with anger or [defensiveness](#) can escalate the situation further. Maintain a professional demeanor and avoid engaging in personal attacks.
- **Focus on the issue:** Separate the aggressive tone from the content of the message. Concentrate on addressing the core issue being discussed, rather than reacting to the aggression. Keep the conversation focused on working together to find solutions.

- **State your boundaries:** Politely but firmly communicate your [boundaries](#). Let the person know that you expect to be addressed respectfully and will not engage in aggressive exchanges.
- **Stay empathetic:** Try to understand the underlying reasons for the person's aggression. They might be experiencing stress, frustration, or pressure that's influencing their communication style.
- **Seek support:** If the aggression is frequent, inappropriate, or escalates to the point of harassment, seek the support of your manager, HR, or other appropriate channels.

Passive-Aggressive Communication Style

A [passive-aggressive](#) communication style combines elements of both passive and aggressive behavior. These are some of the characteristics of this communication style:

- **Covert criticism:** Passive-aggressive communicators may use sarcasm, backhanded compliments, eye-rolls, or disrespectful gestures to indirectly mock or criticize someone's ideas or actions.
- **Indirect communication:** Rather than addressing issues head-on, people who communicate passive-aggressively resort to more subtle, indirect tactics. They use veiled language that leaves room for ambiguity and later gives them an opportunity to deny their words.
- **Silent treatment:** Rather than communicating clearly, they might give people the [silent treatment](#) or withhold important information as a form of expressing displeasure.
- **Subtle sabotage:** They may subtly engage in actions that undermine other people's projects or initiatives.
- **Involvement of others:** Instead of addressing issues directly with the concerned parties, they might complain to colleagues or superiors to garner sympathy or support. They might frame themselves as victims, deflecting responsibility for their passive-aggressive behavior.

A passive-aggressive communication style breeds mistrust and misunderstandings. It can cause tension to build among team members, which can eventually lead to conflict in the team.

What to Do If You're a Passive-Aggressive Communicator

If you're a [passive-aggressive](#) communicator, these are some strategies that can help you be more direct and [assertive](#) in the workplace:

- **Reflect on your communication style:** Recognize and acknowledge your passive-aggressive tendencies. Understand the negative impact they have on your relationships and team dynamics.
- **Work on being more direct:** Make an effort to express your thoughts, concerns, and opinions directly and honestly. Work on sharing ideas openly, praise generously, and feedback constructively.
- **Be mindful of your tone:** Pay attention to your tone and [body language](#). Aim to communicate in a way that is respectful and collaborative.
- **Don't let issues fester:** Don't let issues pile up and fester. Address things in a timely manner, while they are still manageable, to prevent [resentment](#) and passive-aggressive behavior from setting in.
- **Seek constructive outlets:** Instead of resorting to passive-aggressive tactics, find constructive ways to express frustration or disagreement with colleagues.

How to Interact With a Passive-Aggressive Communicator

These are some strategies that can help you interact with a passive-aggressive communicator:

- **Stay professional:** Respond to their behavior calmly and professionally. Avoid reacting with [frustration](#) or aggression, as this might give them more ammunition to use against you.
- **Focus on the facts:** Stay focused on the facts of the situation. Address the actual issue at hand, rather than getting caught up in their passive-aggressive comments or behavior.
- **Seek clarifications:** If their communication is unclear or ambiguous, ask them to clarify their intentions or concerns. It may be helpful to get things in writing, so there's no room for misinterpretation.
- **Be direct:** Encourage open and direct communication. If you sense [passive-aggressive behavior](#), gently encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings more directly. Let them know that you value open and honest communication and that disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated.
- **Address the pattern:** If you notice a consistent pattern of passive-aggressive behavior, address it politely but firmly. For example, you could say: "I sense some frustration in your tone and I'd like to understand what's causing it. Can we talk about what's bothering you?" or "If you're facing any challenges or in disagreement about something, I'm willing to listen and work with you to find a solution."

Assertive Communication Style

These are some of the characteristics of an assertive workplace communication style:

- **Straightforwardness:** Assertive communicators express themselves clearly, using straightforward language to convey their thoughts and ideas. They are often direct and to the point, says Morgan. They can say "no" or set boundaries when necessary.
- **Confidence:** People who communicate assertively speak with conviction, projecting [confidence](#) and self-assurance.
- **Respect:** Assertive people respect others' opinions, feelings, and autonomy.⁵ They acknowledge differing viewpoints and seek common ground.
- **Ownership:** Assertive individuals take ownership of their feelings and communicate them without blaming others. They use ["I" statements](#) to express emotions.
- **Expressive body language:** They use open and engaged body language while communicating. For instance, they maintain eye contact and use gestures to reinforce their messages.

An [assertive](#) communication style fosters a positive, respectful, and collaborative work environment. While it may take some getting used to, working with someone who communicates assertively can be a real positive because you never have to wonder what they mean or where you stand, says Morgan.

What to Do If You're an Assertive Communicator

If you're an assertive communicator, these are some strategies that can help you improve your communication skills further:

- **Keep an open mind:** While being assertive can help you get your point across, it's also important to be [flexible](#) and keep your mind open to other people's ideas and approaches.
- **Be adaptable:** Remember that different situations may require different communication styles. It's important to tailor your style to individuals and situations whenever possible, so Morgan recommends being mindful of who you're speaking with and how they prefer to communicate.
- **Be patient:** Sometimes, assertive communicators can be impatient with people who don't get directly to the point. Try to [cultivate patience](#) and remain calm and composed.

- **Offer reassurance:** Not everyone will understand your communication style—some people may feel intimidated or feel as though you aren't being "nice" enough, says Morgan. It can be helpful to offer reassurance on occasion so people know you mean well.

How to Interact With an Assertive Communicator

These are some strategies that can help you interact with an assertive communicator:

- **Avoid beating around the bush:** Assertive communicators tend to prefer to have folks communicate directly back to them, so focus on speaking confidently and concisely to them, says Morgan. Avoid beating around the bush and come to the point succinctly when you're interacting with them.
- **Respect their perspective:** Even if you have differing opinions, acknowledge and [respect](#) their viewpoint. A healthy exchange of ideas can lead to better understanding.
- **Give honest feedback:** If the conversation involves feedback, provide it in a clear and straightforward manner, focusing on behaviors and outcomes. They are likely to appreciate constructive, actionable feedback.

What Kind of Communicator Are You?

Our fast and free [communication styles quiz](#) can help give you some insight into how you interact with others and what it could mean for your interpersonal relationships, both at work and at home.

This communication styles quiz was reviewed by Ivy Kwong, LMFT.

How to Improve Your Communication Skills

These are some strategies that can help you improve your workplace communication skills, according to the experts:

- **Develop self-awareness:** Take some time to [self-reflect](#) and become more aware of your communication style at work. Identify your strengths and pay attention to areas that could use improvement. It can also be helpful to ask your colleagues for feedback on your communication style.
- **Decide what you want to be known for:** Goredema recommends deciding what you want to be known for at work and then considering how your communication style can support that reputation.
- **Listen actively to others:** [Active listening](#) is a strategy that will serve you well, says Goredema. She explains that it involves listening fully to what the other person is saying, without interrupting, making assumptions, or jumping to conclusions based on their words or nonverbal cues. You can show the person that you're engaged and actively listening by nodding, maintaining eye contact, and asking clarifying questions during the conversation.
- **Ask open-ended questions:** Close-ended questions typically evoke a "yes" or "no" response, whereas [open-ended questions](#) can reveal underlying motivations, beliefs, and attitudes that may not be apparent at the outset, says Goredema.
- **Adapt to your audience:** Tailor your communication style to the preferences and needs of your audience. Adjust your approach depending on whether you're speaking with colleagues, clients, or superiors.
- **Learn from your mistakes:** If you become aware of a miscommunication, address it promptly and openly. Learn from these situations to avoid similar issues in the future.

Moment of gratitude: Communication

Think of one person in your life. It could be a friend, a loved one, a colleague, a classmate, a teacher, etc. Think of one of their strongest qualities in their communication with you, from anything mentioned in the article as a tip. Even though this person is probably not perfect and probably does not always listen to you perfectly, take a moment to express gratefulness that this person has this quality with you, and how it makes you feel.

Moment of self-reflection: Strong and weak points

If you look at the list of tips in the article, in any section, at least one should stand out as a strength that you already have, and one as a weakness that you could work on. Which are they?

Moment of self-reflection: Communication style

Which of the four communication styles describes you best? Based on that, choose one tip of something you could improve. How could you work on improving that?

Moment of self-reflection: Second communication style

A lot of us actually have more than one communication style. Maybe it depends on the context, like if we're feeling comfortable or not. Let's say that you have a second communication style. Which one is it? When looking at the tips for that style, do you see something you could try to improve on?

[illegible]

Part 2: Video (take notes of “important” sentences as needed)

Charles Duhigg on communication and supercommunicators

[illegible]

Moment of reflection: Communication problems

Think of one recent situation where communication between you and someone else did not go great: At least one person did not seem happy with how the conversation went. Charles Duhigg believes that this often happens because the two participants were in “different conversations.” Does his theory seem to apply to your case?

Moment of reflection: Clarifying questions

Charles Duhigg says that we can all improve our communication by asking many more questions, especially very open questions, clarifying questions. Think of a recent conversation where someone told you something, anything. It could be a story they told you, or a feeling they expressed when you said, “How are you?” Reflect on questions you asked that person. Using the space here, explain what they told you and invent some questions you could have asked to understand better, listen better, be a better communicator.

Quick journaling: Goal and plan

Today, you learned about interpersonal communication and professional communication. Is there a way in which you would like to improve as a communicator? If so, take a minute to express here the problem you want to fix, the goal you have in mind, and think of a short-term plan that could help you reach that goal, or at least practise it.
