

# Dealing with Conflict and Complaints

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Dealing with Conflict and Complaints

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# Preface

Not many people like to deal with conflict, do you?

Perhaps it's the difference of opinion or if someone is getting aggressive towards you, but it's not a pleasant experience.

So how do you deal with conflict and complaints? Do you become aggressive back when it becomes a matter of who "wins" or "loses" the argument? Or do you use cunning and well thought through communication and interpersonal skills to get you through the other end with the outcome that you desired?

In this textbook you'll learn the key skills and the techniques to handle conflict and complaints in many different ways. From dealing with the direct and outright abusive person through to the calculated "I want to be right at all costs" person, you'll learn the communication and soft skills to deal with all situations where conflict arises.



Sean McPheat, the Founder and Managing Director of management development specialists, MTD Training is the author of this publication. Sean has been featured on CNN, BBC, ITV, on numerous radio stations and has contributed to many newspapers. He's been featured in over 250 different publications as a thought leader within the management development and training industry.

MTD has been working with a **wide variety of clients** (both large and small) in the UK and internationally for several years.

MTD specialise in providing:

- In-house, tailor made management training courses (1–5 days duration)
- Open courses (Delivered throughout the UK at various locations)
- Management & leadership development programmes (From 5 days to 2 years)
- Corporate and executive coaching (With senior or middle managers)

MTD provide a wide range of management training courses and programmes that enable new and experienced managers to maximise their potential by gaining or refining their management and leadership skills.

Our team of highly skilled and experienced trainers and consultants have all had distinguished careers in senior management roles and bring with them a wealth of practical experience to each course. At MTD Training we will design and deliver a solution that suits your specific needs addressing the issues and requirements from your training brief that best fits your culture, learning style and ways of working.

Our programmes are delivered when and where you need them! We believe that training should be fun, highly interactive and provide “real world” practical techniques and methods that you can use back in the office – and that’s exactly what we provide.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Overview of the Ebook

In this ebook, we'll be looking at the root cause of conflict and complaints. If you can begin to understand how conflicts and complaints arise, you can use that information to stop future problems. Then we'll look at a set of skills that are important when you want to resolve a conflict or handle a complaint. They will help you be a better communicator in general as well. Next, we'll take a look at individual communication styles and how they might be used to help you foster the communication that is needed to make conflict and complaint resolution possible. Finally, we'll look at a series of tools and techniques that you can start using right away to manage and respond to conflict and complaints in your workplace.

## 1.2 Expectations as the Root of All Conflict and Complaints

In this chapter, we'll examine a root cause of all conflict and complaints – unmet expectations. We'll look at several examples to help show how unmet expectations cause conflict and complaints, as well as how you can use your knowledge of the importance of expectations to pre-empt conflict and complaints in the future. You'll learn how to set expectations so that you and the other person or party are in agreement rather than in conflict.

## 1.3 General Skills Required for Dealing with Conflict and Complaints

In Chapter 3, we'll be looking at the general skills that anyone who wants to be able to deal with conflict and complaints will need. The important thing for you to know is that all of these skills can be learned and developed.

These general skills include:

- **Listening Skills** – you must be able to listen to what the other person is saying to you – as well as what is not being said. You must be willing to take the time to understand what the other person truly needs and to identify the root of the problem the other person wants solved.
- **Effective Communication Skills** – in addition to listening, you must be able to respond well. You must be able to communicate your side of the situation to the other person and then to be a part of the conversation that leads to the solution of the problem.
- **Problem Solving Skills** – at their roots, all complaints and conflicts are problems that need to be solved. If you have a customer or colleague that is complaining or if you have a conflict with another person, you actually need good problem solving skills. We will discuss some strategies for doing so in this ebook.
- **Interpersonal Skills** – beyond communication skills, you will need to know how to work well with others in order to be most effective. They should be courteous, respectful, and skilled at building relationships.

- **Persuasion Skills** – persuasion skills are needed if you are going to help the other person accept a solution you pose or if you are going to negotiate resolution around a conflict that exists. It requires that you are able to identify the benefits to each party for coming to resolution.
- **Customer Service Skills** – once you have a customer relationship, whether that customer is internal or a external, maintaining your relationship with that other person is important. If your “customer” is internal to your organization, like your boss or your colleague, you can apply customer service skills as well. Do you look for ways to help your customers even when there is no conflict or complaint? Do you keep aware of what situations might lead to a conflict or complaint and act to stop them from developing ahead of time?
- **Integrity** – in any relationship, but particularly in a relationship where you need to resolve a conflict or complaint, integrity is vital. Without it, you will lose the other person’s trust, or their business, or you will cause additional problems when the other person feels that they can’t trust what you are telling them.

#### 1.4 Communication Styles as Barriers to Dealing with Conflicts and Complaints

In Chapter Four, the focus will be on our innate communication styles – the way that we communicate naturally with other people. We’ll learn how that style might be affecting our ability to resolve a conflict or solve a problem. And just as importantly, we’ll look at how the communication style of the other person might be showing up in your attempts to negotiate a problem or solution to the situation you are facing.

#### 1.5 Techniques for Dealing with Conflict and Complaints

In this chapter, we’ll look at some tools and strategies for dealing with conflict and complaints. But it’s important to remember that conflict can actually be a benefit to an organization. How so? Well, when it is handled well, it can lead to:

- Improved relationships between those who were in conflict
- Increased understanding for the different parties around a situation or topic
- Personal growth in skills of conflict resolution
- The identification (and hopefully, the improvement) of processes that aren’t working

In other words, conflict resolution offers you the opportunity to identify hitches in the way things currently work – whether they be relationships, communication, products, or processes – and then come to an agreement on how to improve those things. Of course, the opposite is true if conflict is not handled well. If it is ignored or allowed to escalate, relationships, the team’s ability to function, the workplace, and the product or service produced will all suffer. So understanding how to handle conflict is vital to ensuring that you can be as effective as possible in the workplace.

## 2 Expectations as the Root of All Conflict and Complaints

### 2.1 Introduction

The main point of this chapter can be summed up in one sentence:

*All conflict and complaints are the result of someone's expectations not being met.*

Think about it for a moment. When was the last time you had an argument with someone at work? Can you trace the root of the argument? What did they do or not do? What did they say or not say? In some way, they failed to meet your expectations of performance, relationship, quality, attendance, or in some other aspect.

Now think about the last time that you had a disagreement with someone in your personal life. Perhaps a spouse, child, friend, or some other relationship. Again, can you trace the root of the disagreement? What did they do, not do, or say or not say? Were your expectations not met or were the other person's expectations not met? At least one person had expectations about your interaction that were not met – otherwise there would have been no upset.

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## 2.2 What Expectations Were not Met?

It can be difficult at first to determine what expectations were not met when you are dealing with a conflict or a complaint. Let's look first at some examples of a customer who has a complaint. In Figure 1 below, the left-hand column shows the customer's complaint and the right-hand column shows the possible expectation(s) that the company or product did not meet. Take a look at each complaint and see if you can think of a similar situation that you've experienced either as the provider or as the customer.

Customer's Complaint	Unmet Expectation
The product broke after just two uses.	That the product would be high-quality.
The product cost more here than at a competitor's location.	That your company would offer the best price and/or best value.
Your delivery person isn't here yet.	That you would honor your appointment with the customer and/or that you would value the customer's time.
You didn't return my call.	That you would care enough to act quickly to resolve the customer's concern or complaint.
You're the third person I've had to talk to.	That your company's customer service people would be able to handle the customer's question quickly or efficiently – without wasting the customer's time.
You didn't have what I wanted in stock.	That your company would have the product they needed so they weren't wasting their time coming to your location.

**Figure 1:** Customer Complaints and Unmet Expectations

Notice that each complaint has a root in an unmet expectation that is usually pretty obvious once you start looking for it. We should also point out that each time the customer's expectation is unmet, their anger or upset will be greater. For example, I might not even complain the first time that I go to your store and the item I want is out of stock. It might take two or three times of it happening before I get agitated enough to complain. So by the time I do complain, I may be agitated beyond the point that seems rational. In other words, my anger may be greater than what you would expect for the situation that has occurred. It doesn't even have to be your store where something I wanted has been out of stock repeatedly, but for whatever reason, when it happens this time in your store, it is the last straw.

Now let's take a look at conflicts between co-workers or you and your supervisor or subordinates. We are going to consider the conflict in light of your co-worker's complaint or concern. Figure 2 proposes conflict situations on the left-hand side and suggests possible unmet expectations on the right-hand side.

Conflict (Other Person's Complaint)	Unmet Expectation
You didn't get the report to me on time.	That I would have more time to review and comment on the report before it was due. That I could count on you to do what you promised.
You acted without getting my input.	That my input is valuable in the process. That you understood my role.
You spoke to me in a rude tone.	That you respected me enough to be polite even if we disagree. That I would be treated a certain way by others at work.
You didn't give me enough time to do this.	That you want a quality product and that I would have the time needed to produce quality. That I wouldn't have to be concerned about your thoughts on my performance on this project.
You haven't made a decision yet.	That I would know your decision by now so that I could do my part of the job. That I wouldn't have had to postpone other work because I thought you had a priority assignment for me (and now I'll have to work late this week to finish everything).

**Figure 2:** Customer Complaints and Unmet Expectations

As you can see, any conflict can be boiled down to an expectation or set of expectations that were not met. If you are ever in a situation where the unmet expectation is not clear, try asking the following questions:

- What didn't happen that you wanted to happen?
- What happened that you didn't want to happen?
- What would you have changed in this situation?
- How would you have done this differently?
- What impact did this situation have on you (or your work group)?
- How did you expect this situation to go?

Using these questions should help to pinpoint the unmet expectation that is the root of the conflict or complaint.

Once you get good at identifying the unmet expectations, you'll find that it starts happening automatically. But this is actually good news. It means that we can learn to use expectations as a tool that will prevent complaints and conflict in the future.

## 2.3 Using Expectations as a Tool to Prevent Conflict and Complaints

Now that we know that unmet expectations are the root of conflict and complaints, we can use that knowledge when working with others to help prevent similar events from happening in the future. It does take a bit of practice at using precise language, but once you start using the skill you will also start to see the advantages it produces. You can use the SMART criteria, normally used for goal-setting, as a way to help set expectations as well.

A SMART goal is one that is:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Realistic
- Timely

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### 2.3.1 Specific

When an expectation is specific, then you have clearly identified what it is that you want to be accomplished. If you can't say specifically what you want to achieve, then how can you expect yourself or a subordinate to be able to achieve it? A specific expectation will answer the questions:

- Who? Who is taking action or is affected?
- What? What is the result I want to achieve?
- Where? Is there a specific location?
- When? When do I want this done by?
- Which? Are there restraints or requirements that have to be met?
- Why? Why is this important? What specifically is the benefit of this expectation?

For example, let's say that you want your co-worker to do a better job of getting you their report data on time. That's not specific enough. If you answer the questions above, however, it becomes much more specific:

- Who – this specific co-worker
- What – I want this person to deliver the exact data that I need from them by the agreed-upon time so that I can complete my report and get it to my boss by the due date.
- Where – In my email inbox.
- When – By 3 p.m. on Thursday afternoons.
- Which – the data required for the T980 report
- Why – So that I have time to get the data reformatted and inserted into the report with the rest of the team's information.

### 2.3.2 Measurable

Each expectation that you set should be measurable so that you have a means of ascertaining how far along you are in meeting the expectation as well as when you have met it. So, for our example above, our measures include the data required for the T980 report (it's either complete or it's not) and the time frame that we want it by (it's either on time or it's not). Our example didn't address any expectations we might have about quality, but you could include that as well if it were applicable. Perhaps you could state that you want a certain percentage of accuracy or that you want to only have to contact the co-worker for questions 1 out of 10 weeks.

To find the measures for your goal, ask the questions:

- How much?
- How many?
- How often?

Or, just answer the question, “How will I know when I’ve reached my goal?” When you know how much work is expected, it will also help you to plan the work you need to do for the week. For our example, if I am the co-worker that hasn’t been getting my information in on time, I will now understand that I have to plan some time in my workday before Thursday at 3 p.m. so that I can get the data in as expected.

### 2.3.3 Attainable

As we saw in the last section, having a measure for your expectation lets you plan the work that is necessary to achieve it. But before you begin working, you need to be certain that the expectation is attainable. What if in our example above we said we want the data from our co-worker by Wednesday at 3 p.m. But the co-worker doesn’t even have the information until Thursday morning. Then our expectation of having it by Wednesday at 3 p.m. is not attainable. When we set expectations with or for other people, we need to be sure that we have considered what our existing resources are and what the workload a person already has might be.

### 2.3.4 Realistic

If an expectation is to be realistic, it must be something that you are willing and able to work towards and that the other person is willing and able to work towards. This doesn’t mean that all your expectations have to be low and simple. It just means that you have done a thorough analysis of the the resources at hand and the demands on those resources and you have come to the conclusion that the expectation is realistic. Some questions you could ask yourself during this analysis include:

- Do I have the resources (financial, personnel, equipment, etc.) to meet the expectation (or does the other person?)
- Do I have the support of others in the department and the organization for this expectation?
- What knowledge or expertise am I lacking that I will need to locate or learn?
- Have I reviewed my existing workload with my supervisor to prioritize this expectation with the rest of my duties/expectations?

### 2.3.4 Timely

The final component of the SMART expectation strategy is ‘timely.’ Without adding a time restriction to your expectation, you don’t have the necessary motivation to get going as soon as possible. Adding a realistic time boundary lends a sense of urgency to the expectation and will help to keep you focused. Since organizations change regularly, so can expectations. Making sure your expectation is set with a time limit also ensures that you meet the expectation while it is still relevant to what you are doing on the job.



## 2.4 Conveying the Impact of Unmet Expectations

Sure, this is helpful information when you are working with another person whose job involves agreeing with you. But what if you don't have the authority to expect a specific performance from the other person? For example, you are colleagues but there is no supervisor / supervisee relationship.

In these instances, you should convey to the other person what the negative impact is when they don't meet your expectations. The impact could be on:

- Your ability to do your work
- Your division's or department's ability to complete their work
- Your sense of team work
- The quality of the work you can produce
- The customer's perception of your organization
- Any loss of income or potential income

When you share the impact that not meeting an expectation has, be sure that you do it in a neutral, non-accusatory way. You can say something like:

*When you don't get the report information to me on time, it makes it difficult for me to get the report in on time. I end up rushing to get finished and sometimes I have to stay late to get it done on time.*

Or another example might be:

*When you didn't make the decision to buy the Widget 2000 by the agreed-upon time, it meant that my entire team had to drop what they were doing and put the order together at the last minute. I had to pay overtime, which has a negative impact on our budget and means that there might not be overtime pay available when we need it later this quarter.*

Notice that these are business-related impacts that you are sharing. You aren't saying 'this ticked me off.' If you do share an emotion, be sure you also share the impact of that emotion. So if you say, "when you don't show up on time, it makes me feel like you just don't care about your job." Go on to also say the impact of that feeling, like: "That makes me feel like I shouldn't trust you with bigger assignments or more responsibility." That way you aren't just complaining – you are showing the impact that the other person's actions have on you and their own work situation.

# 3 Basic Skills for Dealing with Conflicts and Complaints

## 3.1 Introduction

In any conflict or complaint situation, you need a series of skills that help you to understand the situation or the feeling, come up with solutions or proposals to respond to the situation, and then be able to communicate that information to the other party. You might need to negotiate or persuade others. And all of this should be done within the context of providing good customer service – whether that customer is a true external client or an internal customer like your boss.

The good thing about these skills is that they can all be learned. As you read through this information, try to identify where your own weaknesses might be. Then you'll have an idea of what you need to work on in order to improve your own sales skills.

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## 3.2 Listening Skills

Resolving a complaint or conflict requires that you can listen to and understand what the other person is telling you. It sounds simple enough, but the truth is that good listeners are rare these days. Studies have shown that most listeners retain less than 50% of what they hear. Imagine what that means when it comes to a conversation that you might have with your boss, a colleague, or a customer. If you speak for ten minutes, chances are that you have only heard about half of that conversation – and so have they. No wonder miscommunications happen so frequently!

Studies have shown that most listeners retain less than 50% of what they hear.

In order to be a good listener, you should practice active listening skills. There are five key aspects of becoming an active listener. You are probably already employing some of them, but may need to practice others. However, once you are using these tools over time, you will find that they get easier and easier. Plus, you'll learn so much about your customers, colleagues, and co-workers, and you'll have such better conversations with them, that you will be positively reinforced each time you practice.

### 1. Pay close attention.

With this step, you learn to give the speaker your undivided attention. But you also let the speaker know that you are listening by using acknowledgements – types of verbal and non-verbal tools that help add proof that you are truly listening.

- Look the speaker in the eyes
- Stop any mental chatter
- Don't start preparing your response or rebuttal while the other person is talking
- Make sure your environment doesn't distract you
- Notice the speaker's body language and tone of voice – what are the non-verbal messages telling you?
- If you are in a group, avoid side conversations

### 2. Demonstrate physically that you are listening.

Use non-verbal and verbal signals that you are listening to the speaker attentively.

- Nod from time to time, when appropriate
- Use appropriate facial expressions
- Monitor your own body language. Be sure you remain open and relaxed rather than closed and tense
- Use small comments like 'uh-huh', 'yes', 'right'.

### 3. Check for understanding.

It is possible for the other person's message to get mistranslated or misinterpreted, so that we hear a message that was not intended. Before responding, it's important to check for understanding using these tools.

- Use reflecting and paraphrasing. Check that you heard the message correctly by saying things like “what I hear you saying is....” or “If I'm hearing you correctly, you're saying....” or “I think you're talking about....”
- Ask questions that will help clarify the speaker's meaning. Suggestions include things like, “Can you tell me more about...?” or “What did you mean when you said...?” or “I think you're saying...is that right?”
- Summarize what you've heard occasionally – don't wait until the end or you might not remember exactly what was said.

### 4. Don't interrupt!

There is nothing good that comes from interrupting the speaker. You will only be limiting your chance of understanding the message because you won't hear it all – and because the speaker will get frustrated!

### 5. Respond Appropriately.

When you are actively listening, you are showing your respect for the speaker, as well as gaining the information that you need to form your response. Once you have that information and have clarified it, it's time to form your reply. When expressing your thoughts:

- Be honest and open
- Be respectful
- Be thorough

## 3.3 Effective Communication Skills

Effective Communication Skills – in addition to listening, you must be able to respond well, whether in person, over the phone, or in writing. You must be able to offer solutions to the customer's complaint or to offer ways to resolve a conflict with someone at work if you are to ever keep the customer or repair the relationship with the other person.

Imagine you are on one side of a wall and the person you want to communicate with is on the other side of the wall. But there's more than the wall in the way. The wall is surrounded by barriers. These barriers could be things like different cultures, different expectations, different experiences, different perspectives, or different communication styles, to name just a few.

Communication skills are the tools that we use to remove the barriers to effective communication.

You might experience only one of these barriers at a time, or you might find yourself facing them all. Getting your message to the other person requires that you recognize these barriers exist between you, and that you then apply the proper tools, or communication skills, to remove those barriers preventing your message from getting through.

Of course, communication is a two-way street. The person on the other side of those barriers will also try to send messages back to you. Your ability to understand them clearly could be left to a dependence on their ability to use communication skills. But that's leaving the success of the communication to chance. Instead, you can also use your own communication skills to ensure that you receive messages clearly as well.

Finally, there isn't only one point in your communication with another person at which you have to watch out for barriers. To be successful at communicating, it's important to recognize that these barriers to communication can occur at multiple points in the communication process.

Remember that communication skills involve both verbal and non-verbal communication. When communicating with others, the non-verbal aspects of what we are saying are actually more important than the words that we use. In fact, if the two conflict, we will automatically believe the non-verbal communication we are receiving over the verbal.

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We instinctively recognize what body language and other non-verbal forms of communication are telling us.

So what do we mean by non-verbal communication? Mainly, we are referring to tone of voice and body language. Tone of voice is responsible for about 35–40 percent of the message we are sending. It involves the volume, emotion, and emphasis in our voice when we speak.

Over half of the message we are sending can be due to body language. Body language is a subconscious way that we communicate, but it is one that we recognize in others on instinct. Examples of body language include:

- Facial expressions
- The way they are standing or sitting
- Any swaying or other movement
- Gestures with their arms or hands
- Eye contact (or lack thereof)
- Breathing rate
- Swallowing or coughing
- Blushing
- Fidgeting

Basically, body language includes anything they are doing with their body besides speaking. We recognize this communication instinctively, without having to be told what it means. It is important that when you speak to the other person, your body language supports rather than contrasts what you are saying. This is particularly true when you need to build trust with the other person because any contrast between your words and your body language could be construed as deception.

### 3.4 Problem Solving Skills

If you think of every complaint or conflict as a problem, then you need problem solving skills to move past the issue. The tricky part of this situation is ensuring that the problem that you are attempting to solve is the actual problem that exists.

The first step in problem-solving is to ensure that the problem you are trying to solve is the actual problem that needs solving.

For example, a co-worker might come to you saying that they need you train their employees on how to use their software correctly. You could just write the training and deliver it and move on. Or instead, you could ask the co-worker questions in order to determine what the problem is that they are trying to solve with the training. You may then be able to:

- Offer a training that focuses on the exact problems the employees are having.
- Discover that the software isn't the only part of the problem and so offer a training that addresses the full problem.
- Discover that the software wasn't the problem at all but that it was the order fulfillment process that was the true problem – so now you can offer a training that addresses the real problem.
- Determine that training isn't the solution to the problem, but that another action such as updating the software or updating other procedures is the real solution.

One simple problem-solving tool is to use something called 'The Five Whys.' It is simple because it uses the question 'why' up to five times in order to help get to the root of a problem. But remember that it is indeed a simple tool – if you are dealing with a more complex problem, you may need to learn other problem-solving skills. An example of how to use this tool is shown in Figure 3 below. Notice that in this case, it's not necessary to use five 'why' questions to get to the root of the problem.

Customer	Salesperson
I need a copy of your ABC billing software.	Might I ask why?
We are having problems keeping track of customer bills.	Why are you having trouble?
We do it by hand, but now our customer base has grown so much that we can't keep up. Correspondence in general is difficult.	Why is correspondence difficult?
Because we have about 10 different pieces of information that have to go out to different customers in addition to the bills. Keeping all that in order is quite a challenge.	It sounds to me like you need more than a billing system – it sounds like a customer contact management system is what you really need. Why don't I show you some of the benefits it could provide?

Figure 3: Using the Five Whys Tool

### 3.5 Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills are more than just communication skills. They are the 'people skills' that seem to come to some of us so naturally, while other of us may struggle with them. Interpersonal skills will help you to work with others and build rapport with them, but they will also help you to respond to complaints and conflict in a productive manner.

Some interpersonal skills include:

- Courtesy – it's been said that good manners cost nothing, and that's the truth. There is no reason to be anything but courteous when dealing with your customers and colleagues. It fosters relationships and shows that you care about making the other person comfortable.
- Respect for others – you've heard the 'golden rule', that you should treat others the way that you would like to be treated. But the true expression of respect is something called the 'platinum rule' – treating others the way that they would like for you to treat them.

- Ability to see things from others' perspectives – if you have a customer who is upset about something, you might feel as if they have overreacted at first. But you need to be able to understand how what has happened is affecting your customer.

Perhaps to you, having the order arrive one day late is not a big deal. But to your customer, it could mean lost sales, lost productivity, embarrassment for him in dealing with his own customers, or any number of things. Your job is to understand – and express that understanding – so that the customer feels heard and acknowledged.

- Ability to understand various communication styles – each of us has a way of communicating with the world, and that of the person you are dealing with could be very different from your own. These differences could create barriers to relationship building if you don't understand how they may show up.

For example, a person who you perceive as being rude or cold may simply be reserved or shy. Or a person you see as intrusive or forward may simply be interested in people in general and does not mean any disrespect. This is just one form of keeping an open mind when working with others – a huge factor in interpersonal skills!

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### 3.6 Persuasion Skills

The most important skill in persuasion is the ability to understand the point of view of the other person and then provide information on your position that will matter to that person. The facts might be important, but the benefits of those facts, or the impact of those facts, are what will persuade the other person to your side. As an example, let's look at persuasion skills that are important for selling. In fact, all persuasion is a form of selling – whether it's selling a product or an idea. Let's imagine that you sell alarm clocks – a simple example, certainly, but it will help you to see the difference between features and benefits in Figure 4 below.

Features	Benefits
Dual Alarms	Lets you set a back-up to be sure that you don't oversleep, or lets you set different alarm times for different people.
Large, Illuminated LED Numbers	Makes it easy to see the time without turning on any lights. Easy to see even if you are sleeping without glasses or contacts.
AM/FM Radio	Allows you to enjoy music at any time, or to set your alarm to activate on the music station of your choice.
MP3 Player Jack	Turns your alarm clock into speakers for your MP3 player for use at any time of day. You can also program the clock so that you wake up to your favorite songs on your MP3 player.
Durable Plastic Casing	This clock can withstand those early morning slaps to turn the clock off.
One Year Manufacturer's Warranty	Protects your investment. With any malfunction of the clock, you can get a replacement in the first year.

**Figure 4:** Comparison of Features and Benefits

Now imagine that you are trying to persuade a boss to allow adjusted time schedules (flexible scheduling) and working from home one day per week. What would the features and benefits be? See Figure 5 for an example.

Features	Benefits
Employees can work from home one day per week.	Better employee satisfaction and retention. Improved work output on one day of telecommuting. Fewer traffic-related tardies and fewer traffic-related absences due to accidents. Reduced overall employee stress levels.
Employees can work flexible schedules, working their eight hours anytime between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. as long as it is scheduled ahead of time.	Better employee satisfaction and retention. Less tardiness and fewer absences related to childcare issues. Improved customer service because someone will usually be available across all twelve hours to respond to customer.

**Figure 5:** Features and Benefits of Flexible Time Schedules and Telecommuting

Here are some more tips on how to persuade others:

### 1. Demonstrate Your Understanding

Putting yourself in the other person's shoes lets you look at the scenarios they are facing and helps you to concentrate on finding the best solution for their situation. When you work with the other person, try to realize that a complaint is not about you – it's about them and their expectations. Ask questions that demonstrate you want to learn about their needs and how you can help resolve their problem – as well as how to prevent it from happening again in the future.

### 2. Generate a Friendly, Responsive Environment

Don't underestimate the impact of being friendly and responsive. Your attitude in working with the other person, meeting their needs, and handling their requests says a great deal about you and your willingness to resolve issues quickly and in the best way possible. Plus, for customers, your responsiveness – how quickly you respond and how well you meet their expectations – will be an important decision point for any customer. One good rule of thumb is to under-promise and over-deliver for your customers. You'll be demonstrating an exceptional level of customer service that they will want to experience again in the future.

### 3. Provide Evidence and More Evidence

You need to be able to demonstrate the other person that your idea, solution, or resolution will benefit the customer, situation, or organization in ways that the other solutions cannot. Give the other person as much evidence as you can – testimonials, data, commitment from others, or any other information that helps to solidify your position. And then remember to make sure you are providing information that is of value to the person you are trying to persuade! No matter what you do, be sure that anything you share is fully verifiable.

#### 4. Demonstrate Your Expertise

Who would you be more apt to be persuaded by – someone who knows the basics about your situation or someone who you believe truly understands what you are facing? As you work with the other person, demonstrate that you understand what you are presenting to them. Share information that shows you understand their situation, including any upcoming trends, or challenges. You'll instill confidence in the other person, making it easier for them to choose your idea or solution.

### 3.7 Customer Service Skills

You have customers both within and outside of your organization. In fact, imagine how different you would treat colleagues and co-workers if you considered them as important as your external customers. Customer service is not just a series of steps that you complete. It is an attitude and a way of looking at your internal and external customers that enables you to provide the best level of service that you and your organization are capable of providing. So what does it take to provide excellent customer service skills? The answer to that question could fill books of its own, but here are a few tips on some main points:

- Take responsibility for the other person's experience – from first contact and beyond the resolution of the situation or complaint. Customers might only need to interact with you once – or they might need to interact with you repeatedly over time. But even if they only interact with you once, they can carry an impression of you and your customer service with them and tell others about you – the good and the bad.
- Remember that even if you have dealt with this same issue a hundred times already today, it is the first time that the other person is dealing with it. Put yourself in their shoes and try to understand how their problem is impacting them and their side of the business.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate. Whether you have good news or bad news or just some interesting news, you need to remain in communication with your colleagues and customers. Many times a customer will be more likely to be understanding about a situation as long as you keep them informed about what is going on.
- Honor your word. When you make a promise, be sure that you can deliver on it – and hopefully, exceed what you've promised. Your word is very fragile with others – it takes only one time of failing to deliver on your word for you to destroy the reputation that you've built with them.

### 3.8 Integrity

As in any relationship, integrity is vital in your relationships with the people you work with. What do we mean by integrity? A simple definition is that someone with integrity acts in accordance with their values and their commitments. This means that if you act with integrity, you will be fulfilling not only your organization's values, but your own.

A simple definition of integrity is acting in accordance with your values and your commitments.

When you demonstrate that you have integrity, you show that you are someone who can be trusted and that you have the best intentions for your colleagues and your customers. This can make you a valuable partner and a trusted colleague. It can take multiple interactions to show that you have integrity – but, as mentioned above, you can damage your integrity with only one failed interaction. Remember that every time you work with another person, you have an opportunity to demonstrate your integrity.

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# 4 Communication Styles as Barriers to Dealing with Conflicts and Complaints

## 4.1 Introduction

Each one of us has a style of communicating that is unique. Some of us are talkative and extroverted while others are quiet and reserved. Some of us are outspoken while others are less likely to share their opinions in public. Still others of us are formal and direct while others are informal and like to take our time getting to the main point. So how do these different styles of communication impact us in the workplace?

Communication style refers to the choices we tend to make when communicating to others. It involves two basic dimensions: the assertiveness level of our communication and the emotiveness level of our communication. We also use different styles depending on with whom we are communicating.

Differences in communication style can lead to barriers in communication success.

When you work with someone who has a decidedly different communication style from your own, that difference can act as one of the barriers to effective communication, problem solving, and complaint resolution. You may feel that someone is being aloof and cold while they feel that they are being quick and business-like. Or you might feel that someone is being too analytical and detailed, while they feel that you aren't recognizing the importance of the small things that can make a big difference.

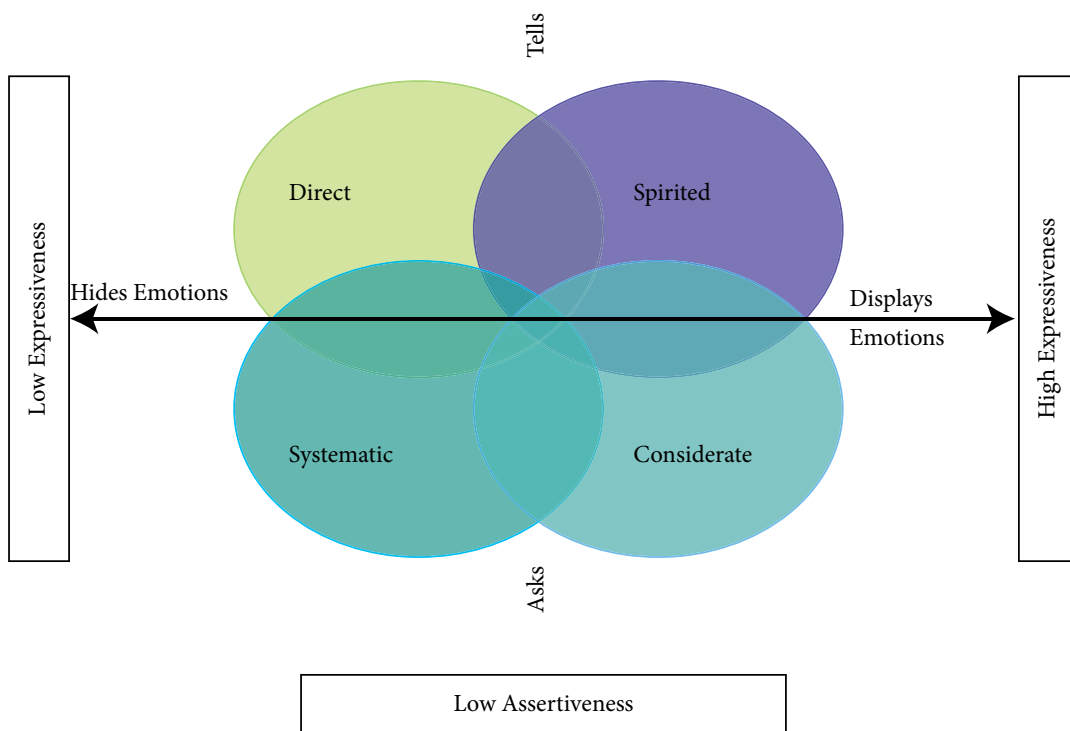
There is a way to overcome these differences, however. It involves learning the basic characteristics of the different communication styles and how they influence the context in which your communication is happening. If you can learn to understand the other person's communication style and how it is manifesting itself in the way they communicate, you are learning your audience and what they need in order to understand your message. You can then send your message in a way that they will be more likely to be able to understand, thereby increasing the chance that your message will be delivered successfully.

To put it another way, imagine that you are in a foreign country. You can stumble about, using your own words for things and trying to communicate, with the result being that one or both parties may become frustrated – and with very little chance that you will get the result that you want. But if you can speak the language of the person you want to speak with, suddenly you can communicate. You can ask for what you need, give them the information they need, and hopefully come to resolution. When you employ this communication tool, you simply make the choice to communicate to your audience in their 'native tongue.'

So how do you start? You begin by studying the four basic communication styles and how they relate to each other. You identify your own personal communication style and what particular barriers you might face when trying to problem solve and communicate with the other styles. Then you learn some simple tools you can use to enhance your communication with others, no matter what communication style they are.

### 4.2 The Communication Styles Matrix

There are many different models that describe the ways in which we communicate. But one very useful model is based on the work of Dr. Eileen Russo. Her matrix is displayed in Figure 6 below. It shows that there are two different dimensions in communication styles: the level of expressiveness and the level of assertiveness.



**Figure 6:** The Communication Styles Matrix

Each quadrant in Figure 6 represents a different communication style. People can fall anywhere within each quadrant, becoming more uniformly one style over the others as they move further from the center.

The assertive communication styles tell others what to do while the less assertive styles ask others what should be done.

The more expressive styles show emotion while the less expressive styles refrain from showing it.

Notice that the more assertive communication styles tend to ‘tell’ others what to do. The less assertive communication styles tend to ‘ask’ others what should be done. The more expressive communication styles tend to show their emotions in their face, speech, and tone. The less expressive styles will either not express their emotions or will work to hide them. The resulting four basic communication styles are shown in Figure 7. In the following sections, we’ll look at the basic characteristics of each communication styles and some things you can do to help you communication well with each type.

Low Expressiveness + Low Assertiveness = Systematic

Low Expressiveness + High Assertiveness = Direct

High Expressiveness + High Assertiveness = Spirited

High Expressiveness + Low Assertiveness = Considerate

**Figure 7:** The Four Communication Styles

#### 4.2.1 The Direct Communication Style

As indicated in the communication style matrix, people with the direct communication style are highly assertive and not expressive. They tend to tell others what to do instead of asking others what they think should be done, and they will not easily show emotions in their communications with others. Their communication style is meant to be expedient, though others may not always see it that way. They may appear terse and cold to others, who might take their style of communicating personally.

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People with direct communication styles are the 'go-getters' in the group. They will work hard and fast and will brook few questions or distractions.

These people need to use caution to avoid appearing dictatorial or cold.

If you are a direct style, you could probably use some practice with listening skills.

Direct communicators will try to tell you as little as possible before moving on to the next topic – not because they are trying to be evasive, but because they are trying to save time. They won't always stop to listen to others, even if the others have something valuable to contribute. They may seem impatient and overbearing at times, but it's not meant to be personal. They are attempting to focus on results rather than emotions. They will speak their minds, even if it could be off-putting to others. Don't expect them to talk about their personal lives – they like to keep business and personal issues separate. They don't back down from conflict, and at times could be seen as being aggressive rather than assertive in the way that they express their opinions.

When working with them on problems or conflict, focus on the facts and steer clear of emotions unless you can express them effectively and succinctly. Figure 8 gives tips for you if you are a direct style, while Figure 9 gives you tips for working with others who are the direct style.

#### **Tips for Communicating if You Have a Direct Communication Style**

- Make an effort to listen fully to others and avoid interrupting
- Allow time for 'chatting' at the beginning of a meeting
- Recognize that others may feel the need to express their emotions about topics
- Recognize that brainstorming can be helpful and not just a 'time waster'
- Try to communicate your expectations for how a meeting will go – the length of time, the topics to be covered, and the expected results – before a meeting occurs
- Take the time to show your appreciation for others' contributions
- Don't use email for sensitive or complicated topics
- Allow time in your schedule for questions and feedback

**Figure 8:** Tips for Communicating if You Have a Direct Communication Style



### Tips for Communicating with People with a Direct Communication Style

- Ask if they have time to talk before jumping in
- Get to the point quickly – don't bore them with lots of background information
- Limit 'chatting' or conversation that is off-topic
- Use short, direct sentences
- Ask for a specific call to action or make a specific request
- Do not speak in the abstract
- Only promise what you are certain you can deliver
- Don't give or ask for information about personal issues unless they initiate it
- Don't sugar coat things – speak plainly

**Figure 9:** Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Direct Communication Style

#### 4.2.2 Spirited Communication Style

People with the spirited communication style are very interested in the 'big picture'. They are the dreamers, the inventors, and the innovators in the group. Their communication may be full of grand ideas and hyperboles that tend to be very persuasive to others at first. However, they are not always very good at discussing the details or the exact steps in the process. They will tend to go off on tangents in their conversations, and like to interject anecdotes into their dialogues in order to demonstrate or drive home a point.

People with the spirited communication style love to flesh out ideas, brainstorm, and talk about the big picture – as long as they get to do a lot of the talking!

Spirited people can have a hard time nailing down the details in their wonderful ideas. They may also have a hard time sticking to an agenda or to one topic.

Keeping to an agenda is sometimes a challenge for those with the spirited communication style since both time management and remaining focused are challenges for this group. Their written or verbal communication may tend towards the dramatic. While they can be very entertaining, getting them to communicate clearly on specific topics may take the assistance of someone else to guide them through a conversation and keep them on track by bringing them back to the subject at hand.

If you are involved in a conflict or trying to resolve a complaint with a spirited person, expect there to be a high level of dramatics in the conversation. If you can communicate that you understand the big picture of why they are upset or disappointed, you will demonstrate a great deal to the spirited person. See Figures 10 and 11 for tips on communicating as or with a person with a spirited communication style.

**Tips for Communicating if You Have a Spirited Communication Style**

- When considering new ideas to share, also consider whether or not you have suggestions on how to put those ideas into action
- Respect agreed-upon agendas and time limits when in meetings
- Try to limit your sharing of personal anecdotes that take the group off-topic
- Make sure you are allowing others to contribute their ideas and suggestions – and that you are listening
- Be certain any requests you make are clear and that you convey the reason for asking
- Communicate your appreciation for others’ work and input

**Figure 10:** Tips for Communicating if You Have a Spirited Communication Style

**Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Spirited Communication Style**

- Use an agenda with time limits listed for each topic
- Praise them in front of other people
- Learn to gently redirect the conversation back to the topic at hand
- Understand that they may exaggerate
- Challenge them to break down their ‘big ideas’ into specific outcomes and steps
- Reaffirm with them what they have agreed to do
- Use check-lists or other written reminders as a way to help communicate what needs to be done

**Figure 11:** Tips for Communicating With People Who Have a Spirited Personality Style

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### 4.2.3 Systematic Communication Style

Those with a systematic communication style like to focus on facts and details rather than opinions and possibilities. Expect to use and appreciate logic when you communicate with a systematic. They will appreciate facts and analysis rather than the ‘big picture’ ideas that have not yet been proved useful. They may be slower to respond to your communication, as they are probably analyzing the situation and constructing a logical, well thought-out response. Charts, graphs and trends are all useful tools for communicating with systematic as well.

People with a systematic communication style will focus on facts over opinions. Communication with tangible evidence is best for systematic. They will likely be uncomfortable expressing feelings and will tend to avoid confrontation.

Those with a systematic communication style are uncomfortable with expressing their feelings about things and do not like conflict. They may tend to shut down communication rather than dealing with emotional or confrontational situations. If you give them directions, you will need to be very thorough and precise in relaying them. The more that you encourage their participation in a problem-solving situation, the more likely they will be to contribute.

The more information you can give them, the happier they will be – as long as the information is relevant to the current discussion or is relevant background information.

In conflict, expect them to withdraw. They may agree to something that they don't truly support, particularly if it goes against established standards or processes. Sell them on the logic of your suggestion if you want them to agree with you, and demonstrate the fairness of a solution if you are responding to a complaint from them. Figures 12 and 13 give you tips for communicating if you have a systematic communication style or if you are speaking with someone with a systematic communication style.

#### **Tips for Communicating if You Have a Systematic Communication Style**

- Recognize that not everyone follows linear thought processes and decision-making
- Realize that for good working relationships, consideration for others' feelings is important
- Learn to ask qualifying questions that will help you get the information you need
- Ask others questions about themselves if you want to build rapport
- Make sure you understand the scope of a project so that you don't waste time collecting information that is not going to be needed
- If you need to ask for more time for analysis, be able to explain the benefit of the information you are working on

**Figure 12:** Tips for Communicating if You Have a Systematic Communication Style

### Tips for Communicating with People with a Systematic Communication Style

- Focus on the facts of the situation rather than individuals' opinions
- Speak with precision and accuracy rather than generalizations
- Be organized, on time, and on topic when you communicate with them
- Give logical reasons for your actions and for what you ask of them
- Allow them time for research and analysis before decision-making
- Avoid personal topics unless they open the conversation

**Figure 13:** Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Systematic Communication Style

#### 4.2.4 Considerate Communication Style

Those with the considerate communication style are very concerned about the feelings of others. They want to please other people and to be included in their peer group. They like to work with others, help others, and connect to others on a personal level. If there is conflict in your group, they will be the ones to attempt to mediate it. They want everyone to have the chance to speak their minds, have their turns, and receive recognition for their contribution. They are natural trainers and counselors, and enjoy helping others to succeed. They will encourage group collaboration and communication, though they are not always inclined to speak their own minds.

People with a considerate communication style will be very interested in listening and in finding out how you and others are doing. They will want everyone to have a chance to speak, but might refrain from expressing their own opinions if they think it will displease others.

This is the major communication challenge for those with the considerate personality style – they may be reluctant to share an opposing opinion, even if it's important information, because they are concerned about keeping the peace and being liked. They are also inclined to take direct communication as a personal matter. It's difficult for them to separate other peoples' opinions about a topic from their opinions about them, and so may feel that an opposing opinion is due to not liking them. There is also the possibility that they will be talked into something in order to preserve the peace rather than standing their ground.

The good news is that a considerate personality will be willing to work with you in most cases in order to resolve a complaint or handle a conflict. You will want to be sure that you demonstrate that you understand how the situation has made them feel and that you regret any negative feelings that were caused. If others are involved, be sure that you show that you are addressing the concerns of the group, not just of the considerate personality type. Figure 14 offers tips for communicating if you have a considerate communication style, and Figure 15 does the same for communicating with a person who has a considerate communication style.

### Tips for Communicating if You Have a Considerate Communication Style

- Recognize that other people’s opinions about a topic are separate from their opinions about you
- Realize that not everyone is comfortable discussing personal topics with work colleagues; allow others to open personal topics before asking questions
- Respect your own opinion as you respect others’ opinions
- Recognize that you don’t have to be friends with everyone, but you should treat others and be treated professionally

Figure 14: Tips for Communicating if You Have a Considerate Communication Style

### Tips for Communicating with People Who Have a Considerate Communication Style

- When possible, reassure them that your opinions are not personal
- Express a sincere interest in their feelings, thoughts, and personal life
- Encourage them to ask questions and share their opinions
- Let them know that you appreciate their help
- Resolve any conflicts quickly

Figure 15: Tips for Communicating with People with a Considerate Communication Style

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### 4.3 Examples of Communication for Each Style

It will take some time and practice to learn exactly what will work in resolving conflict and complaints with the people in your work group. Hopefully you recognized the people in your office in the descriptions of the different communication styles in the last section. If not, you can pay more attention to how they communicate with you as a sign of their main communication style. Remember too that not everyone fits neatly into a category; some people will bridge more than one style, depending on with whom they are communicating. You may need to do some experimenting to determine which communication style works best with them.

It will also take practice for you to become comfortable in altering your own communication style or methods in order to best communicate with others. You will still be inclined to your natural communication style, which is to be expected. It will also be easier to do at first when you have the time to think about your communication ahead of time, such as when writing an email. However, over time, you will find that you can adjust faster and employ the tools that you need without thinking it out ahead of time.

#### 4.3.1 Direct Style

When communicating with someone who has the direct communication style, the key is to get to the main point of your communication as soon as possible, and to do so in as efficient a manner as possible. The first example below shows the type of communication that will not work with someone who has a direct communication style. In this example, Jane is the one with the direct communication style.

*Hi Jane,*

*I heard from Alex that you have a concern about the new account. He said that you did an excellent job in explaining the company's benefits to the customer and that you were very professional, but that you are concerned that we won't be able to meet the customer's deadlines.*

*Alex also said that the customer asked for a quote on a new phone system for his existing offices. I thought we agreed that we wouldn't be adding another phone system order this quarter. That way we would have a good chance of getting the existing customers up and running to impact this month's numbers.*

*Thanks again, and hope you are having a good Tuesday so far!*  
*Anne*

What is the main point of the communication? What is the requested action? How much of the communication is superfluous information?

A person with a direct communication style will not necessarily glean what you want them to do or by when. They will appreciate the accolade, but they won't appreciate the personal references or information.

*Jane,*

*Great job on the new account. I'd like to meet for 10–15 minutes tomorrow to discuss the telephone system portion of the sale and the overall timeline.*

*Please let me know if you'd prefer to meet at 1:00, 1:30, or 2:00 p.m.*

*Thank you,*

*Anne*

See the difference? The first one does eventually get around to the point, but it is too personal-sounding and doesn't give a clear request for the direct person to respond to. The second one still communicates approval and makes a request, but it does so in a much clearer way. If it seems curt to you, don't worry – the direct style person will appreciate it. It's a perfectly professional communication and there is much less chance for misunderstanding.

#### 4.3.2 Spirited Style

When communicating with someone who is spirited, it might be hard to even pin them down for communication in the first place. And once you have their attention, keeping it is another matter entirely. You will find that consistency is important in communicating with people who are spirited. If you can get them used to a particular format or method of communication, it will be easier to keep them communicating. This doesn't mean always choosing email or always choosing telephone. But it does mean always using follow-up questions or checking in on a regular basis to see if you are both still on the same page.

Also remember that a person with a spirited style may need more time to brainstorm and discuss ideas than the other communication styles. If you want them to come to the table with decisions already made, be sure to get their buy-in beforehand. Otherwise they may still find the need to discuss something that you already felt was decided.

Finally, you can go a long way towards relationship-building with a spirited style person if you give them the opportunity to shine. Does your team need to make a presentation? Let the spirited person know that you think they would be a good choice to lead. Complimenting them in a public arena is a good choice as well. Here's an example of a good written communication to a spirited person.

*Hi Sally!*

*I thought your presentation yesterday was fantastic! I enjoyed the way that you had the audience participate in the session.*

*I would like to discuss whether or not you would be the right choice for the educational component at our next board meeting. The Board of Directors is considering hiring an outside vendor, but I'd like to hear what you have to say first.*

*Would you like to have lunch to discuss it? I'm free on Thursday or Friday this week. Let me know if either of those days will work for you.*

*Thanks so much!*

*George*

Why would this communication work for a spirited person? It is enthusiastic, complimentary, and would be flattering to Sally. She will be pleased that you noticed her first presentation and more pleased that you would like her to repeat it.

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Or course, you're sure to have a very excited person on your hands at lunch. So be prepared. You could bring an outline of the topics you want to cover at the presentation. Ask for her input and make sure you've planned enough time to let her give it. Then help her narrow the ideas down and note them down for her. Sending a follow-up email or note will help ensure that you are both on the same page as well. Remember, the spirited person is very valuable for all their talents and enthusiasm – so with a little structure around your communications you can be successful in communicating without stifling the very qualities they bring to the table.

### 4.3.3 Systematic Style

When you need to communicate with a person who has the systematic communication style, remember that facts are what to emphasize. Opinions are not going to be very effective. Use logical, linear thinking and communicate in the same way. Step them through your thinking – don't jump ahead of any steps. It will save you time in the long run if you take the time to explain your argument or thoughts through the first time.

If you need a systematic to make a decision, let data do the talking for you as much as possible. Have charts? Know some trends? Have examples to show how something works? All of these can be useful in communicating with a systematic person. If you are attempting to encourage a systematic to support an idea that is not supported by the data, you will be in for a bit of a challenge. However, you can still get their help if you can logically explain your position.

Remember too that systematic types are not prone to sharing personal information with work colleagues. You shouldn't take this personally – it's simply what they prefer. Yet if they do broach a

personal subject with you, you can usually take it as a sign that they feel more comfortable with you than others. The example of how not to communicate with a direct communication style person is a good example of how not to communicate with someone of a systematic style as well. You could also avoid phrases like:

- It's my opinion that...
- I believe that...
- I feel that...

Instead, try using phrases like:

- The data shows that...
- The trends show that...
- The results of the test show...

The chart below gives more suggestions for language that will work better with systematics:

Instead of...	Use...
Some, many, the majority of	20%, three out of five, an average of 2.7
Next week	Thursday at 3:00 p.m.
ASAP	By tomorrow at noon
In a timely manner	Within two weeks
They	Gail, Amy, and Wes
An upward trend	An increase of 12% over five years
Eventually	When the following conditions have been met:

**Figure 16:** Suggestions for Language to Use with Systematics

#### 4.3.4 Considerate Style

To best communicate with someone who is a considerate communication style, remember that the person’s feelings are going to be important. They will listen best when you make them feel as if their feelings are important to you, their opinion is important to you, and that you value them as a team member and a contributor. This doesn’t mean that you have to become very emotionally expressive yourself, but showing in interest in them as an individual will go a long way. Why not start your communication with an inquiry into how their child is doing, or how their last vacation was? The small investment of your time can have a great return.

If you have something to communicate that will perhaps be perceived as a critical, you will need to tread cautiously in order to be effective. Let the person know that you appreciate their work, and name the aspects that you find valuable and good. Then note the changes that need to be made, explaining the reason for the changes as much as you can. Smile, and use open body language to let them know that there is nothing personal in what is being said. Whenever possible, use requests instead of imperatives in discussing the needed changes.

For considerate style people, the example of used as how not to speak to a direct style person is actually a good one to use for a considerate style. It builds to the point easily, it shows care for the other person, and it makes a request in a friendly, personal manner.

# 5 Tools for Dealing with Conflict and Complaints

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we will look at techniques that you can use to respond to complaints and conflict before they actually occur. You will probably be more comfortable initially with some of them over others; this is natural. But as you continue to grow as a problem-solver, keep all of these in mind so that you have the resources you need to effectively handle conflict and complaints.

## 5.2 Get to It First

Imagine you work in an organization where there are certain aspects of your work that are repetitive. You work with the same types of customers or provide the same types of service again and again. The first few times you present your product or service to customers or present a solution to a co-worker, you won't necessarily know what concerns or complaints you will receive. But by the time you've been presenting awhile, you're going to get a feel for what the common complaints are.

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When you do receive them, be sure to note them. Then you can adapt your presentation to include your responses to those common complaints for the next time that you have to present. In fact, include them several times if you can. Then by the time you get to the closing part of your presentation, you will be much less likely to hear that complaint or concern.

For example, if your boss is always concerned about cost, include information in your presentation on the return the organization can expect on the investment. Or if you have an employee that always objects to working overtime if others are doing it as well, include information in your presentation on the way that overtime will be assigned so it is understood ahead of time.

### 5.3 Silence is Golden

Next time you face a conflict, pay attention to how quickly you respond – and often in a defensive way. But you can often actually let the other person resolve his or her own complaint or concern if you will simply do one thing: pause. This is difficult, especially when we are so attuned to what customers like our actual clients, our supervisors, or our colleagues ask and what they want. You can let the person know that you are listening by your facial expression, but try to remain silent for at least five seconds.

Why? Because sometimes what you hear as a complaint is actually just the other person thinking out loud. They may continue and answer their own thoughts, or they might somehow rephrase the complaint for you. If they repeat it in some way, it's time to use another tool. But don't jump to the conclusion that a comment is a complaint. Give the other person time to think through their comment before you jump back in.

### 5.4 Thank Them

When a customer makes a complaint, they are actually sharing their point of view with you. The worst thing that you can do to anyone who is sharing their point of view is to negate it or get defensive. Would you rather win the conflict or lose the customer? Thanking the customer for making their point will set the tone for the rest of the discussion as collaborative instead of defensive. It does several other things as well. It:

- Shows that you are listening and appreciate the customer's input
- Lets you leverage a bit of authority as the expert on the issue
- Gives you a moment to gather your thoughts and prepare your answer

### 5.5 Empathize

Everyone likes to feel that others understand and empathize with them when they speak their mind. One of the most enduring and popular ways for you to demonstrate this to your customers is to use something called the 'feel, felt, find' technique.

You use it by using a three-part response to a complaint. For the following example, let's imagine that your customer has complained to you because the product didn't work the way that they thought it would. Using this method, you might say:

- I understand how you *feel*.
- I have certainly *felt* the same way when I've been disappointed by a product...
- But once you receive the replacement unit, I think you'll *find* that the product will do everything that you need it to do. Let me get that replacement unit shipped out to you today and I'll also include return postage so you can ship the faulty unit back to us.

One word of caution when using this technique; it's a well-known technique in some circles. If you are dealing with people who are themselves accomplished sales or customer service people, they may readily recognize what you are doing. If that's the case, you could change the words slightly or change the order that you use them. The point is to make sure that the customer feels heard and understood.

## 5.6 Brainstorming

Of all the tools that you will use to solve problems and resolve conflicts, brainstorming is the least complicated and the easiest to use anytime, anywhere. When people are engaged in a brainstorming discussion, the ideas should be flowing out and everyone should be participating. To help your brainstorming sessions be as productive as possible, consider the following guidelines:

- Forbid negative comments or criticism. If someone is afraid that their ideas will be mocked or ignored, they will not want to participate. Consider directing your team to brainstorm individually and then in pairs before coming back to the group if you have a large team or a team that is not acquainted with each other.
- Go for a high quantity of ideas, not necessarily the best ideas. You want to start broadly and then narrow them down after the brainstorming is completed. People think differently and express themselves differently, so allow as many ideas to come out as you can before beginning to narrow down the field.
- Encourage people to think outside the box – way outside of it. Don't censor anyone or judge their ideas. Again, let the creative thinking process work. Even if something sounds crazy, capture it – you never know when that crazy idea might lead you to a realistic solution.
- Look for ways to combine new ideas with existing ideas. Often, the easiest way for people to think creatively is to start with something they are already doing and enhance, expand, or otherwise alter it. Allow people to build off of each other's ideas and help inspire one another.
- Consider appointing a facilitator who can guide the group back to the topic at hand and keep the brainstorming going. However, be sure that the facilitator is also able to participate in the discussion.

## 5.7 Fishbone Diagrams

Fishbone diagrams are visual representations of the information that you gather during a brainstorming, problem-solving, or troubleshooting discussion or exercise. It is a way to organize your thoughts into like groups and establish relationships between those thoughts. While fishbone diagrams are excellent for exploring issues or finding the causes of a problem, they are not useful for identifying timelines or costs associated with the solution. The fishbone diagram gets its name from the fact that the way it is drawn often resembles the skeleton of a fish. It was designed by a Japanese industrial quality management professor named Kaoru Ishikawa, so they are sometimes referred to as Ishikawa diagrams as well.

A fishbone diagram usually has two 'sections' to the drawing. On the left hand side (and the majority) of the diagram, you list the suspected causes of a situation, problem, or issue. On the right hand side, you have the 'head' of the fish, which is the effect, the situation, or the issue itself. Each 'rib' of the fish leads into the 'spine' of the fish and indicates a factor that you believe is contributing to the overall problem or situation. These diagrams are usually hand-drawn during a brainstorming discussion, but an example of a fishbone diagram is shown in Figure 17 below.

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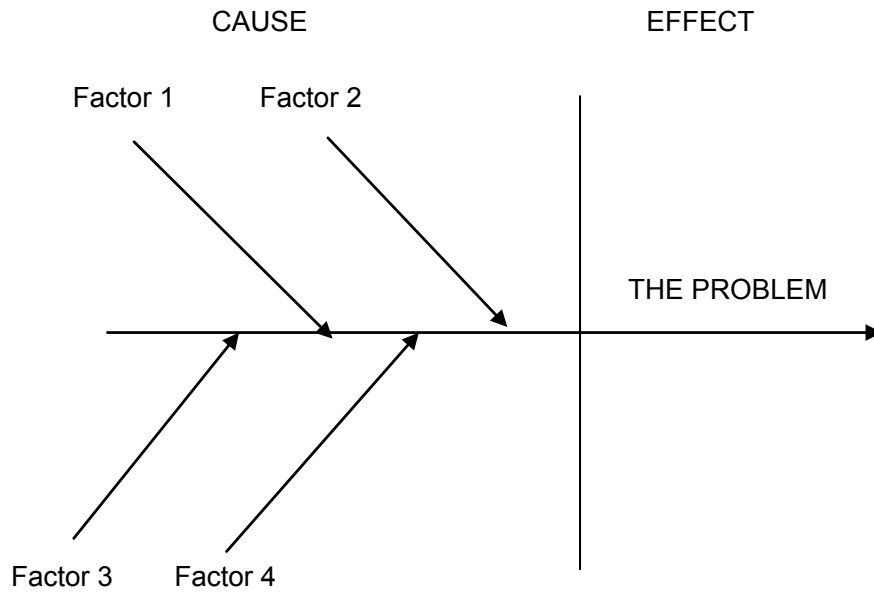
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**Figure 17:** Example of a Fishbone Diagram

Each of the 'ribs' of the fish may have sub-issues, which could also then have sub-issues. You can continue to 'branch' each rib down to several levels of issues if you need to. The end result is that you have a kind of 'map' of the situation, with all of the factors that are causing the problem or situation that you can think of. You can now prioritize each factor depending on how much influence you believe it has on the result. As you investigate and eliminate factors from consideration, you will identify the main source of a problem or issue.

Common factors that are placed on a fishbone diagram are:

- People
- Process
- Materials
- Equipment
- Systems
- Environment
- Management
- Training
- Legal

Of course, some of these might actually be sub-factors of each other. For example, under people, you could have management or training. It simply depends on the situation you are examining and the factors that are affecting it.

## 5.8 Applying Conflict Styles

The theory that people have one of five preferred conflict styles was posited by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann in the 1970s. Similar to the way that communication styles can help you to identify how another person is communicating their concerns to you, these five styles will help you to understand why the other person might be acting the way they are during a conflict. You can also choose a given conflict style to apply during discussions, depending on the situation that you are dealing with. They are:

**Competitive:** These people like to win. They like to be in a position of power and will definitely take notice of who has the most authority in a conflict situation. They may decide to dig in on a position, even if they don't yet have all the facts. This is a useful style when you have to get into action and make a decision (when you don't have time for a lot of discussion), when you know the decision you want to put in place is going to be unpopular, or when you have someone else you are dealing with who is being aggressive or trying to exploit a situation. Be warned, however, that this style often results in hurt feelings and dissatisfaction in others, so it should be reserved for emergency or occasional situations.

**Collaborative:** This is the opposite style of competitive. In this style, you try to accommodate everyone's point of view. You might be assertive, but you want everyone's input because you believe it is important. When you have existing conflict in a group that has not been resolved, when the decision needs buy-in from everyone, or when the situation is very important, you can use this style.

**Compromising:** In this style, you go into the discussion expecting that every person involved will need to make compromises of some sort, including you. The attempt is made to find some aspects of the solution that will satisfy everyone in the party. This is a useful style when it is more important to have agreement and consensus on an issue than to hold on to your point of view. Or, you can use it when you have two equally strong opponents who seem to be deadlocked at this point of their discussion. This can be a time-intensive strategy as well, so it might not be the best choice if you have a tight deadline.

**Accommodating:** In this situation, you don't give a lot of opposition to the other party. You are willing to make concessions in order to make the other person happy or give them what they want. You are cooperative rather than assertive. In general, you use this style when the relationship with the other person is more important than getting a specific outcome, or when you really don't have a great deal of stake in the discussion or the results.

**Avoiding:** When you use this style, you actually seek to avoid the conflict entirely. You might try to delegate it to another party or to avoid making a decision that you know might be unpopular. If it is appropriate to pass the conflict on to another party who has more information or is more invested in the outcome, then by all means, do so. However, this is more often than not going to be a bad choice in strategy. There are few situations in which avoiding conflict will actually be beneficial.



## 5.9 The Interest-Based Relational Approach

The interest-based relational approach, called IBR for short, lets you respect the differences among individuals involved in the conflict but also helps to keep them from becoming too attached to a specific position. To use this strategy, you follow a simple set of rules. They are:

- Agree that maintaining relationships will be the first priority
- Keep the problems you are facing separate from the people you are dealing with (in other words, don't let the discussions get personal)
- Listen for why the other person is taking the position they are taking. What benefits are they looking for? What is important to them?
- Listen, listen, listen. Allow the other person to fully explain their point of view before responding or stating your own.
- Find points of mutual agreement. These are usually facts or objective elements that you can agree upon. For example, you might have a set budget, a set date, and an agreed-upon theme for your event. Start building from what you can agree upon first.
- Agree to explore multiple options together. Conflict resolution is rarely achieved by entrenching yourself in a position and refusing to budge. Agree to keep an open mind while you explore several possible solutions.

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# 6 Resources

Business.solveyourproblem.com: Brainstorming.

<http://business.solveyourproblem.com/brainstorming/group-brainstorming.shtml>

Fiske, Christine and Janet A. Clark. Negotiation Skills.

<http://extension.missouri.edu/publications/DisplayPub.aspx?P=gh6830>

Johnson, Emjae. List of Basic Skills that Every Successful Sales Person Should Have.

<http://sales.about.com/od/hiringsalespeople/tp/basicsalesskills.htm>

JustSell.com: Negotiation Guide.

<http://www.justsell.com/negotiation-guide/>

Mindtools.com. The 5 Whys. Quickly Getting to the Root of a Problem.

[http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC\\_5W.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTMC_5W.htm)

Mindtools.com. Communication Skills Articles, various.

<http://www.mindtools.com/page8.html>

Mindtools.com. Conflict Resolution. Resolving Conflict Rationally and Effectively.

[http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR\\_81.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm)

Neyman, John, Jr. 5 Powerful Tips to Persuasion.

<http://www.submyourarticle.com/articles/John-Neyman%20Jr-482/speaking-2255.php>