

From communication mistakes to communication mastery

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Even though communication is often referred to as “soft skills” a more appropriate term is [critical skills](#). If you look at any workplace issue, at the root you see a communication problem, which affects workplace relationships.

Leaders rely on critical communication skills to resolve conflict, increase effectiveness, initiated [difficult conversations](#), and keep everyone focused on the end result. Leaders step on land mines because they don't know how to transform communication mistakes into communication mastery. This article gives the context for three common mistakes and a simple tip for communication mastery.

Mistake No. 1: Defending your position before understanding theirs

You can try all day to explain why something is fair, but if you have someone in your office complaining about how unfair something is, you may win the argument, but you won't win their understanding. Your first step is to take a breath and listen. Listening doesn't mean you agree, just that you are trying to understand their emotional experience. Being understood is important, but it won't happen until the employee feels understood first.

Context: Kim's job description has changed and Kim doesn't like it.

Mistake: “Listen Kim, there's nothing I can do. It's just part of my job.”

Mastery: “Kim, it sounds like you are frustrated. You have every right to feel what you feel.”

Conclusion: Once Kim perceives that you understand, she is more willing to work with you to become part of the solution instead of working against you. Listening and acknowledging someone else's emotional reality is the first step to finding common ground and defusing a potential argument.

Mistake No. 2: Getting distracted

You've probably been in one of those conversations that started out with an end result in mind, but ended up in a game of Ping-Pong, that back and forth conversation where you continue to

argue about irrelevant issues.

Context: Stephanie comes to you complaining about a co-worker. You ask Stephanie to have a conversation with the co-worker first. Stephanie is angry that you won't fix the problem, and accuses you of not understanding.

Mistake: "Yes I do understand. I was once an employee. You are just trying to be difficult."

Mastery: "Stephanie, perhaps you are right. The real question here is what do you really want?"

Conclusion: People complain because they don't know what they want. When you help employees identify what they do want versus what they don't want, you can coach them to initiate effective conversations with their co-workers rather than blaming others for their unhappiness.

Mistake No. 3: Allowing power of attorney

A big hole managers step into is listening to the employee who seems to represent everyone else. Many inexperienced managers enjoy having a mole to give them inside information. The problem is, the mole is often the very one preventing teamwork.

Context: Randall says, "Everyone is very unhappy about the new schedule."

Mistake: "How do you think I should fix it?" or, "Tell me more..."

Mastery: "Please ask everyone to come in here to talk about it. I'll wait while you fetch them."

Conclusion: Don't let any employee speak for another. Make employees represent themselves. No one should be allowed to be power of attorney.

Final thoughts: The most valuable skill you have as a leader is your ability to communicate. Critical communication skills help you build relationships, manage conflict, inspire action, and align the team. Communication mastery is an ongoing life-long process that helps you to [elevate your leadership](#) and your life.

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