

Improving Safety Communication Skills: Becoming an Empathic Communicator

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Introduction

Effective safety communication is the cornerstone of a healthy organizational safety culture. As Geller (2005) points out, "...the status of safety in your organization is largely determined by how safety is talked about, from the boardroom to the breakroom" (p. 117). The current paper addresses how various communication patterns impact safety communication and provides guidelines to foster Empathic communication to improve organizational culture and performance.

Understanding the Dominant, Passive, Passive-Aggressive, and Empathic Communication Patterns

There are a number of causes of poor communication, some of which include:

- Lack of information or knowledge
- Not clearly explaining goals and priorities
- Not listening
- Failing to ask questions when something is unclear
- Preconceived ideas/close mindedness
- Jumping to conclusions
- Not understanding others' needs
- Losing patience and allowing discussions to become heated
- Time pressure
- Failure to explore all options
- Poor communication patterns

The final item, poor communication patterns, may be the most challenging communication obstacle to overcome. Our communication patterns are shaped by cultural variables, personality traits and states, environmental conditions and many other factors. Unfortunately, we may learn maladaptive styles of communication that hinder personal and/or organizational effectiveness. For purposes of this paper, communication patterns will be categorized into four categories, including:

- Dominant Style
- Passive Style
- Passive-Aggressive Style
- Empathic Style

This categorization may be a useful heuristic for understanding and improving our communication patterns. Using this breakdown, the Empathic style is set up as the optimal style of communication. The other three styles are considered ineffective (in most situations). Common beliefs, behaviors, and effects on others are shown for each communication style.

Dominant Communication Style

The Dominant communication style is characterized by overbearing, inconsiderate verbal behavior. Common beliefs of the Dominant communicator include: “Others should think the way I do,” “I am seldom if ever wrong,” “My opinions supercede yours,” and “People who disagree with me are either disloyal or misinformed.” These beliefs often lead to the following negative behavioral tendencies:

- Publicly criticizes others (e.g., “You know you’re supposed wear a hard hat. The rest of us are.”)
- Blames others when problems arise.
- Tends to act bossy and negative.
- Frequently bullies others. (e.g., “I told you to quit speeding on that forktruck! I’m not going to tell you again!”)
- Uses verbally aggressive and threatening language.
- Fails to show appreciation for others’ accomplishments.
- Frequently interrupts others and finishes others’ sentences.
- Dismisses new ideas without hearing the rationale first.

The negative effects that the Dominant communicator has on others include:

- Provoking fear, counter-control, and alienation.
- Fostering resistance, defiance, sabotaging, striking back, forming alliances, lying, and covering-up behaviors.
- Damaging corporate culture and morale.
- Hindering optimal organizational performance.

Passive Communication Style

The Passive communication style is also ineffective and is characterized by meek, indirect verbal behavior. Common beliefs of the Passive communicator include: “Don’t express your true feelings,” “Don’t make waves,” “Don’t disagree with others,” and “Others’ opinions are more important than mine.” These beliefs often lead to the following negative behavioral tendencies:

- Typically remains quiet, even when being treated unfairly.
- Asks permission unnecessarily.
- Frequently complains instead of taking action. (e.g., “They never give us time to do these safety audits.”)
- Allows others to make choices for them when it is unnecessary.
- Spends too much time avoiding conflict.

- Tends to be overly self-critical.
- Tends to be overly agreeable. No real point of view is expressed.

The negative effects that the Passive communicator has on others include:

- Others “don’t know where they stand” with the passive communicator. This leads to frustration and mistrust.
- Decreased leadership credibility because the passive communicator is seen as weak and ineffective.
- Decreased communication. People may become overly concerned with how comments are perceived or interpreted.

Passive-Aggressive Communication Style

The Passive-Aggressive communication style is also ineffective and is characterized by sarcastic, gossipy behavior. Common beliefs of the Passive-Aggressive communicator include: “When you have an issue with someone, go behind their backs to deal with it,” “Get back at others if they cross you, even if it takes a while,” and “Build coalitions against others instead of dealing with people directly and honestly.” These beliefs often lead to the following negative behavioral tendencies:

- Appears to agree with others when they really don’t.
- Expresses concerns about an individual to other people instead of that individual him/herself. (e.g., “That new guy never wears his PPE.”)
- Makes sarcastic remarks and takes subtle digs at others.
- May send harsh messages via email and copy others on those emails.
- Holds grudges and values “getting even.”
- Sabotages people behind their backs.
- Withholds assistance to others.
- May give others “the silent treatment.”
- Criticizes after the fact.

The negative effects that the Passive-Aggressive communicator has on others include:

- Increased factions, favoritism, and “back-stabbing.”
- Increased gossip.
- Low interpersonal trust.
- Diminished job performance.
- Increased uncertainty and job dissatisfaction leading to low morale on the job and at home.

Empathic Communication Style

The Empathic communication style is characterized by compassionate, concerned, and considerate verbal behavior. Common beliefs of the Empathic communicator include: “Personal opinions and the opinions of others are important,” “The process of coming to a decision (not just the decision itself) is important,” and “Getting input from others boosts morale and generally leads to better decision making.” These beliefs often lead to the following positive, pro-social behavioral tendencies:

- Communicates using choices instead of demands.
- Tends to be proactive, assertive, and action-oriented.
- Tends to be realistic in expectations.
- Communicates in a direct, honest manner. (e.g., “I really appreciate the way you’re setting a good example for safety in our area.”)
- Works to achieve goals without compromising others.

The positive effects that the Empathic communicator has on others include:

- Increased motivation to achieve and “go beyond the call of duty” for the organization.
- Improved sense of appreciation and respect.
- Increased levels of trust, respect, honesty, and openness.
- Enhanced organizational culture, morale, and performance.

Strategies to Become Empathic Communicators

There are various techniques that can be used to improve empathic communication skills. Empathic communicators are assertive, confident, and action-oriented and they express opinions directly and honestly. This allows others to “know where they stand” with the person. Empathic communicators also show respect for others’ opinions, listen carefully to others, and thank others for their input. This sensitivity to others’ feelings/concerns is also demonstrated by:

- Soliciting opinions and ideas from others when making decisions.
- Choosing not to ignore or verbally attack others with different opinions.
- Inviting others to join conversations, especially in meetings.
- Reaching out to people being excluded from conversation (e.g., when an idea is dropped without acknowledgement, bring the idea up again to discuss and reach closure.)
- Confronting problems as soon as they occur and addressing the person directly instead of talking to others about the issue.

Empathic communicators also build trust by appropriately disclosing information about themselves, asking how others are doing, and spending more time visiting with others informally. They also consistently speak positively and constructively with others and don’t let negative feelings with others build up.

Providing Empathic Communication through Other Channels

In today’s work environment, much of our communication is done via email and the telephone. Empathic communicators effectively use these means of communication as effectively as they do with one-on-one conversation. For email, Empathic communicators:

- Keep the language constructive and focused on problem solving.
- Try to be as concise and direct as possible.
- Watch for spelling errors which might detract from the message being sent.
- Avoiding bombarding people with an excessive number of emails at a given time (especially in companies with slow servers).
- Make sure the right people (and not the wrong people) are seeing the emails they send.
- Ensure that sensitive matters are handled in person (not via email).
- Respond to emails as quickly as possible.

On the telephone, Empathic communicators:

- Answer the phone with a warm, professional greeting.
- Demonstrate patience and avoid interrupting others.
- Paraphrase long comments to ensure that both parties are on the same page.
- Use people's names during conference calls to engage them in the discussion.
- Leave direct, succinct voice messages.
- Respond to voice mail quickly.

Providing and Receiving Safety Feedback in an Empathic Manner

Empathic communicators are especially effective when it comes to addressing safety issues and concerns. For many employees, self-esteem is closely tied to job ability and experience. Providing corrective feedback for safety can threaten that self-esteem. When observing others performing at-risk behaviors, Empathic communicators typically remain friendly, positive, and respectful. They also acknowledge others' skills and experience without sounding patronizing, keep the focus on behaviors (i.e., not making it personal), give the feedback one-on-one to avoid embarrassment, and ask questions to facilitate discussion. As importantly, Empathic communicators provide frequent, personal praise for safe behaviors they observe as well as overall safety accomplishments.

Finally, Empathic communicators are equally good at receiving corrective feedback for safety. When others provide them feedback about at-risk behaviors, Empathic communicators remain open and receptive, avoid getting defensive, accept feedback without resentment or retaliation, and often thank the person for providing feedback.

Conclusion

Organizational safety culture is largely determined by the effectiveness of safety communication. By overcoming maladaptive communication styles (i.e., Dominant, Passive, and Passive-Aggressive styles), individuals can incorporate Empathic communication skills to more effectively provide and receive feedback. This should lead to improved safety performance, better morale, and enhanced organizational culture.

References

Geller, E. S. *People-Based Safety: The Source*. Virginia Beach, VA: Coastal Training Technologies Corporation, 2005.