

Managing Workplace Frustration™

Tips and Tools for Improving Productivity, Performance, and Job Satisfaction
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So...what is it about work that makes it frustrating for you?

- Unnecessary conflict?
- Troublesome co-workers?
- Difficulty getting your point across?
- Being misunderstood?

In my experience, most problems in the workplace are the result of challenging relationships with the people we work with. Yes, we may have chosen a job that doesn't suit us, or we may be in an organization with values that don't match our own, but for day-to-day annoyances, they usually center around the people we work with.

Also in my experience, most people problems can be solved with a commitment to improving communication—even with those people we generally don't like and have difficulty getting along with.

Good communication skills are based on commonsense ideas, understanding and respect, and they help to develop trust. They are also some of the hardest skills to master. Since each new skill requires practice, it is best to concentrate on one or two techniques at a time, integrate them into your conversational repertoire, and then move on to one or two more. You will soon be on your way to making every conversation a success.

Clearly understanding each other should be a goal of every conversation. Dialogue brings ideas together, puts them into a common container, and allows the best of what is possible to simmer to the surface. Shared meaning and effective relationships are the result.

This handbook reflects my own experience and research. Although not an exhaustive list, the tips and tools in it have helped my clients **improve personal and professional relationships, build high-trust work teams, and resolve conflict**. The information can help you do the same.

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Unnecessary Conflict

1. **First know yourself, in each situation.** The more you know your own thoughts, motives, and actions, the more accurately you will be able to recognize and deal with those of others. Determine what you want, and what you want to avoid, in each situation. This may not be easy to do.

What specific outcome do you hope for? What result would be ideal? What actions on your part might prevent you from achieving the results you really want? Is there a way for you to avoid behaving in a way that would be problematic?

2. **Figure out what the other person may want—or want to avoid.** Understanding exactly what motivates a particular behavior may enable us to help the person achieve the desired goal, or alleviate the particular fear.

What do you think this other person wants to achieve? Can you verify that by asking some clarifying questions?

3. **Respect the style of people who are different from you.** Some need your undivided attention to feel appreciated; others communicate best when they know the topic of discussion in advance and can properly prepare. Support their conversational preferences as much as you can.

First, what is your style of learning and communicating? How do you suppose others in your group react to your particular style? How are their styles different from yours?

4. **Clarify what you hear.** If you are the listener, ask questions until you get a resounding “Yes!” from the speaker. This confirms that you understand what the person meant.
5. **Be careful beginning a question with the word “Why.”** It often sounds critical, especially in tense or sensitive situations. Other constructions such as “How did that come about?” or “How did you come to that decision?” are more useful and may prevent people from becoming defensive.
6. **Use conversation prompters.** Questions beginning with Who, What, Where, When, and How invite explanation and discussion. Try variations of these:
 - What can you tell me about it?
 - What would you like to see happen?
 - What are you asking me to do (or say)?
 - What can I do to help?
 - Can you give me an example?
 - How did that come about?
 - How do you feel about it?



Troublesome Co-Workers

1. **Turn off your inner critic.** Sometimes we judge people based on appearance, social status, education, reputation, or age. At other times we dismiss the entire conversation once an error of fact, logic, or grammar is made. Instead, look for meaning.

All too often we lose sight of a person's contributions because of a perceived flaw we've noticed. What prejudice have you carried, based on a skill of yours that this other person lacks? What complementary contributions are you failing to recognize because you've caught them in a mistake?

2. **Think the best of others.** Rather than assuming the worst about what the speaker has said, assume the best. Ask yourself what is the best possible thing this person could have meant.

We sometimes neglect to expand our thinking beyond the words we've heard. Can you seek the perspective of someone you trust? What is their take on the person's skill set, attitude, or performance?

3. **Consider your own intent.** Beyond your goals, are your intentions honorable? Is your delivery kind? Are you promoting an agenda that is in the best interests of *everyone* involved? If not, your negative intentions can derail your interaction, no matter how many of these communication techniques you put into place.

4. **Respect the style of people who are different from you.** Some need your undivided attention to feel appreciated; others communicate best when they know the topic of discussion in advance and can properly prepare. Support their conversational preferences as much as you can.

Going forward, be sure to also voice your own preferences. If you are generally reflective and need time to make a decision, let people know that. If you often make quick decisions and want others to give you feedback immediately, let them know that, too.

5. **Get feedback.** Asking people for their comments and suggestions shows respect for their skills and experience. Asking someone less experienced shows appreciation for individual insights and ideas--regardless of years of experience or degree of expertise.

We can all benefit from the perspective of others. Create a climate of allowing people to contribute and everyone will benefit.

6. **Clarify what you hear.** If you are the listener, ask questions until you get a resounding "Yes!" from the speaker. This confirms that you understand what the person meant.

If you haven't determined that you've fully understood, keep going until you are sure. This may take a bit of extra time, but it will save time in the long run.



Difficulty Getting Your Point Across

1. **Verify that you've made yourself clear.** The burden is not on others to understand, but on you to make yourself understood. Ask others to articulate what they've heard you say until you are satisfied that you've been clear enough. Be sure they have accurately assessed your intent and your meaning.
2. **Consider your own intent.** Beyond your goals, are your intentions honorable? Is your delivery kind? Are you promoting an agenda that is in the best interests of *everyone* involved? If not, your negative intentions can derail your interaction, in spite of these techniques.
3. **Are you making assumptions about your listeners that might be influencing your delivery?** We sometimes prejudge those we are talking to and change our approach in ways that may not work. If we assume they are already up to speed on the topic, we may fail to add details they need. If we assume they are dense we may be droing on and causing them to tune out.
4. **There's a difference between being understood and being *right*.** Being understood is not the same as persuading others to agree with you! Looking for agreement with your point of view may not be possible. But if you are directing staff to carry out your instructions, you need to know that they've understood what you want them to do next.
5. **Be assertive, without being aggressive.** In order to be taken seriously, we must be confident and knowledgeable. Our body language, our tone of voice, and the language we use all have an effect on how we are perceived. To gain and maintain credibility, consider carefully how others perceive you, and adapt accordingly when necessary.
6. **Be precise.** Use language that supports your credibility. Eliminate words such as *possibly*, *might*, *ought to*, and *sort of*. Waffling with imprecise words diminishes the power of your message.
7. **Postpone a conversation if necessary.** Arrange to talk at another time if something critical comes up unexpectedly, or if you don't have enough time to discuss an important topic. People will appreciate your commitment to focus on the conversation.
8. **Organize your thoughts before you speak.** Once you know what you want, plan your words with your goal in mind. If you forge ahead without a plan, the conversation may escalate into conflict.
9. **Ask yourself what you are doing, or not doing, to get what you want.** Are you being inflexible? Are you yelling? Could the other person feel threatened in any way? The more you are aware of your own behavior and how you are being perceived, the better prepared you will be to make adjustments.



Being Misunderstood

1. **Accept your responsibility for understanding and being understood.** If you are listening, verify that you have understood the speaker. If you are speaking, verify that you have made yourself clear.
2. **Consider your audience.** Are they engineers who need more data than you may be providing? Is your audience familiar enough with your topic, or do they need more background? Consider setting the stage for your audience by including a framework for your presentation.

Are you promoting an agenda that is in the best interests of *everyone* involved? Are the right people in the room? If not, you can easily be derailed, no matter how many of these techniques you put into place. It's so much harder to play catch up than it is to prepare fully in advance!

3. **Are you focused on being understood or on being *right*?** They are not the same! We sometimes think that being understood is the same as persuading others to agree with us. Clarifying our meaning is important, and looking for agreement may not be possible.

However, if you are directing staff to carry out your instructions, you need to know that they've understood what you want them to do next. Ask them to tell you what they think you mean before sending them off to carry out instructions that may not be clear to them.

4. **Are you presenting yourself in the way you'd like to be perceived?** In order to be taken seriously, we must be confident and knowledgeable. Our body language, our tone of voice, and the language we use all have an effect on how we are perceived. To gain and maintain credibility, consider carefully how others perceive you, and adapt accordingly when necessary.
5. **Be precise.** Use language that supports your credibility. If you have predominately technical people in the room, eliminate words such as *possibly*, *might*, *ought to*, and *sort of*. Waffling with imprecise words diminishes the power of your message.

However, if your audience is in the human services arena, using language related to feelings may be more important than it is in the technical or engineering realm.

6. **When conflict exists, search for a common goal.** You may both want the same thing, but each may be using different words to describe it. As you discover what the other person wants, be honest in articulating what you really want or need yourself.
7. **Organize your thoughts before you speak.** Once you know what you want, plan your words with your goal in mind. If you forge ahead without a plan, the conversation may escalate into conflict.
8. **Ask yourself what you are doing, or not doing, to get what you want.** Are you being inflexible? Could the other person feel threatened in any way? The more you are aware of your own behavior and how you are perceived, the better prepared you will be to make adjustments.



Reading List

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