



Unit 13

Skills needed to become a Successful Administrative Assistant

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand the importance of professional presence on the job
- ✓ Learn how to self-manage to become more effective and efficient.
- ✓ Improve your communications skills, including listening, questioning, and being more assertive.
- ✓ Increase your effectiveness in recognizing and managing conflict, and dealing with difficult people.

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The Basics

The Importance of Appearance

No matter what you may like to think, people judge you based on your appearance. They don't take long to make assumptions, either. If you think that you'd like to march to the beat of your own drum and you don't need to follow some kind of standard for the way you dress, think again. While you may think that you don't have to iron your clothes, you can get away with not polishing your shoes, or that you can wear sneakers with your business suit, we're here to challenge your thinking.

People who are well respected, highly trusted, and most likely to be promoted care about how they look. You shouldn't give in to the temptation to dress according to trends (sometimes they are simply a mistake). You also don't need to wear clothes that shout out who you are. You can dress conservatively and accessorize tastefully if you want to show that you are unique or have flair. Just do so while thinking about how people in your industry look when they achieve success.

Tips for Success

Keep it understated. While someone in a design firm is likely to dress differently than someone in a law firm, both share something in common: if you stray far from what's considered the norm, you can be viewed as disrespectful and even as holding your employer in contempt. That won't do much for your career. Think about making a statement that is professional and one that will be taken seriously for the work you do.

Dress for the job you want, not the one you have. Always consider where you are going within the company. The image that you portray can help you meet your goals, or get in the way.

Be an ambassador. If you are wearing your company jacket outside of work, think about what you are doing. When people know that you work for a particular place, they expect certain things. If you suspect that you might do something foolish, don't wear your company gear outside of work.

Look after your things. Although it may take an investment of time and effort, learn to look after your things. Iron like a pro and get rid of that slightly rumpled, still-in-college look. Replace it with an image that is crisp and professional. Find a tailor and have your trousers or skirts properly hemmed. (You're spending good money on clothes as it is, so respect yourself and present yourself well.) Replace buttons if they go missing. Make sure that you are cleaning clothes according to the instructions on the label.

Footwear requires attention. Shoes need to be in good repair and clean. Don't wear your weekend or gym sneakers even on casual days. Make sure you have a polishing kit and that you know how to look after your shoes to keep them looking like new. People notice your footwear. You can lessen your credibility significantly by wearing a nice outfit and a poor pair of shoes.

Glasses need to be clean. Long-time glasses wearers have a gift for being able to look through a pair of smudged or dirty lenses, but your customers, colleagues, and manager will notice that layer of grime. Keep a microfiber cloth handy to keep your glasses clean.

Leave sexy for another time. Workplaces take professionalism very seriously. It's in everyone's best interests to maintain a professional atmosphere. While you may think you look good in club wear, evening wear, or lingerie, none of these are appropriate office attire. It can also be distracting to the rest of the office. Whether we like it or not, low-cut blouses, tight pants, short skirts, see-through fabrics, poorly fitting bras, ill-fitting suit jackets, or open shirts can contribute to a poor professional impression rather than an appropriate one. At work, the goal is to create an image of competence and professionalism; leave the glamor and glitz for your evenings out.

Keep your breath fresh. Nothing is more off putting than being greeted by someone with bad breath, so make sure that you brush your teeth, floss, and get regular dental check-ups, which are huge culprits in creating bad breath. If you are a coffee drinker or have a spicy meal, make sure you have something handy to clean yourself up. And don't rely on gum: business people should not be chewing gum in the office, in meetings, nor blowing bubbles out on the step.

What is an appropriate look for your workplace?

First Impressions Count!

Photo	Impressions

Debrief

How did you feel making judgments based on first impressions?

Do you feel that your judgments were accurate or realistic?

What can you do over the next 21 days to make a better first impression?

Can you find ways to change or improve your environment?

Do you resist change, and cling to the security of your present lifestyle, or are you open to new ideas and new ways of doing things?

Are you easy to live with?

How would you like to have a parent like you?

What are some of the things you can do over the next 21 days to increase your self-awareness?

Distorted Thinking

Case Study: Angelique’s thinking

Case Study

Angelique had been working as an administrative assistant with the school district for five years. She was laid off from work, along with several other employees, because the school districts were trying to save classroom teaching positions and had to find some savings by letting other staff go. Angelique felt bummed out, worried, angry, and guilty, and she became quite depressed.

She kept thinking to herself, “I’m a born loser. I can’t do anything right. I’ll never find another job. I’m letting my family down.”

Here are some ways that Angelique’s thinking was distorted:

- **All or nothing thinking:** She’s looking at herself in black and white categories, because she sees herself as a total loser.
- **Overgeneralization:** She’s lost her job but is generalizing to her entire self.
- **Mental filter:** She’s dwelling on this bad event and letting it discolor her entire view of life, much like a drop of ink can discolor a whole glass of water.
- **Discounting the positives:** She’s overlooking her many good qualities.
- **Magnification or minimization:** She’s blowing this negative event out of proportion.
- **Emotional reasoning:** Angelique reasons from how she feels. She feels like a born loser, so she believes she really is one.
- **“Should” statements:** She may have the belief that she should always be successful at things and never fail. She may also believe that if she is a good person and tries hard, life should always go smoothly.
- **Labeling:** She’s labeling herself as a born loser instead of trying to learn from the situation or thinking about the best way to find a new job.
- **Blame:** She’s automatically blaming herself for getting laid off. In fact, lots of people were laid off due to budget changes. Angelique’s employment record has been excellent.

The Steps to Feeling Good

Emotion	Describe the Events that Triggered this Emotion	What Kind of Thoughts Lead to this Emotion?	How to Replace the Negative Thoughts
Sadness or depression	Events that involve a loss: a romantic rejection, the death of a loved one, job or money problems, aging, poor health, the failure to reach a personal goal.	You may tell yourself you can never be happy without the thing you have lost or that person whom you loved so much. You may feel a loss of self-esteem because you tell yourself you’re inferior or unlovable.	Identify that this is only one aspect of your life. Identify ways that you can minimize the sense of loss. Find ways to interrupt the cycle of negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones.

Emotion	Describe the Events that Triggered this Emotion	What Kind of Thoughts Lead to this Emotion?	How to Replace the Negative Thoughts
Sadness or depression			
Guilt or shame			
Frustration			
Anger			
Anxiety, worry, fear, panic			
Loneliness			
Hopelessness or discouragement			

Emotion	Describe the Events that Triggered this Emotion	What Kind of Thoughts Lead to this Emotion?	How to Replace the Negative Thoughts

Understanding and Improving your Assertiveness

What is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is a word we tend to use always understanding what it means. **Assertiveness is not** about getting your own way, and it is not a way to manipulate people so you get your own way while you look like you are being considerate. Those are **aggressive traits**. Rather, assertive people express their feelings, needs, and opinions in a forthright manner, while respecting how other people feel and think. Assertive people stop short of the abrasive manner that is the hallmark of the aggressive person.

As we explore the differences among assertive, passive, and aggressive behaviors, you may begin to feel that a little assertiveness is just what you need to cut through many of the interpersonal problems that spring up every day.

Often the best way to understand something is through comparison, so we'll do a little of that here.

People can have difficulty being assertive. They choose **passive** responses to life, perhaps to avoid conflict. They feel helpless, insecure, or resentful, and have a difficult time saying "no." They may feel defensive but are unable to defend themselves.

On the other hand, people may also be arrogant, pompous, and presumptuous to compensate for feelings of inadequacy. They may yell, argue, and cajole to get what they want. They meet life in an **aggressive** way.

The **assertive** person is someone who communicates with others on the best of all possible levels, where there are no losers, fools, or enemies—just two people who are mutually trying to solve their problems.

Assertive behavior allows a person to express honest feelings in a straightforward way, and to exercise personal rights without changing or threatening the rights of others. Assertive people feel positive about themselves and others. They are willing to give others a chance to be reasonable before using less positive tactics. They want to openly discuss problems based on facts and needs. Assertion is based on respect for yourself, and for the other person.

Aggressive Behavior

Definition

- Needs and wants are taken care of in a forceful and self-serving way.

Characteristics

- Self-serving
- Demanding
- Dogmatic
- Competitive
- Pushy
- Uses intimidation, power, and status
- Insensitive
- Strong need to control and dominate others
- Fears rejection
- Impatient
- Temperamental

Major Consequences

- May accomplish personal desire and goals.
- Tends to alienate people, create distrust and tension, and undermine the ability to establish lasting and healthy relationships.

Manipulative or Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Definition

- Needs and wants are taken care of in an indirect, cunning, deceptive, and crafty way with ulterior motives in mind.

Characteristics

- Game player (using pouting, looking hurt, silence, dropping hints, flirting, giving or withholding attention or caring, and other indirect methods to manipulate people)

- Uses double messages (say one thing and mean another)
- Hides real feelings and intentions
- Inward feelings and outward expressions often incongruent
- Rebellious
- Gets defensive and angry when caught manipulating
- Strong need for approval and attention
- Insecure but wears façade
- Distrusts others

Major Consequences

- May be successful in manipulating others in indirect ways.
- Undermines credibility and trust .
- Causes them to lose touch with real self and real feelings.

Passive Behavior

Definition

- Needs and wants are taken care of by suppressing them or maneuvering others to take care of them.
- Also use manipulative behaviors to get others to take care of them.

Characteristics

- Denies needs, subordinates them to others, or manipulates others to take care of them
- Often plays martyr role
- Creates conditions in which others will take the lead or make decisions
- Follower
- Tries to do what they think others expect of them
- Lacks self-confidence
- Easily intimidated and controlled by others
- Indecisive
- Moody
- Occasionally cashes in on stored-up anger and feelings
- Uncertain about who they are

Major Consequences

- May result in some needs getting met.
- Often results in sacrificing needs, getting them met in inappropriate ways, and the loss of identity and ability to take care of self.

Assertive Behavior

Definition

- Needs and wants are taken care of by knowing, accepting, and acting on them in constructive, straightforward, and authentic ways.

Characteristics

- Caring
- Genuine
- Sensitive to the needs and feelings of others
- Selfless
- Expresses needs and feelings in constructive and straightforward ways
- Persistent without being offensive
- Levels and confronts from caring and reasonable position
- Good sense of timing and judgment about when to assert themselves
- Self-confident
- Calm in a crisis

Major Consequences

- Able to know and take care of needs in a constructive way without doing so at the expense of others.

Quiz

Purpose

The purpose of this exercise is to provide an opportunity to assess your individual level of assertiveness through responses to sample situations. This will provide a basis for looking at your beliefs about assertiveness and your use of assertiveness in initiating action or responding to the actions of others.

The term “assertiveness” has been interpreted in many ways. For the purpose of this exercise, assertiveness is defined as declaring your wants, needs, or opinions openly and in good faith; acknowledging your personal responsibility; and respecting the rights of others.

Once current levels of assertiveness are clarified and assertiveness is defined, it is important to identify specific areas where you want to improve.

Instructions

This exercise will focus on these three areas: assessing your current use of assertiveness; clarifying the definition of assertiveness; and identifying situations where you want to improve.

Part One

Assuming a personal or social setting, circle one letter (a, b, or c) for each item. Try to be honest in describing yourself rather than trying to pick the “right” answer.

1. If I want something that I'm not getting, I'm likely to:
 - a. Feel helpless and give up
 - b. Concentrate on finding ways to work toward it
 - c. Get angry and insist on having what I want

2. I think the best way to relate to close friends is to:
 - a. Accommodate to their needs
 - b. Ask them for what I need and expect them to ask for what they need
 - c. Expect them to accommodate my needs

3. I think the best way to relate to new people is to:
 - a. See what kind of people they are before deciding how to relate to them
 - b. Impress them with my skill and knowledge as soon as possible
 - c. Be open and direct from the beginning

4. When I feel hurt by something a family member has done, I tend to:
 - a. Tell them my feelings and discuss it with them
 - b. Avoid saying anything to them about it
 - c. Find a way to get back at them

5. If I am concerned about how my friend feels about me, I am likely to:
 - a. Tell my friend of my concern
 - b. Ask someone else to find out how my friend feels about me
 - c. Accuse my friend of not caring about me

6. When my opinion is questioned, I tend to:
 - a. Back down and wish I hadn't said anything
 - b. Defend my opinion and prove I'm right

- c. Explore the question in an active interchange
7. If I want a book a friend has borrowed for a long time, I am likely to:
- a. Tell them I'd like to have it back
 - b. Let them keep it and buy another copy
 - c. Demand it back and refuse to loan them anything else
8. When I am asked to do something that I think is inappropriate, I usually:
- a. Criticize the person for asking me to do such a thing
 - b. Go along with it even though I feel uncomfortable
 - c. State my concerns about it
9. When someone calls me by the wrong name, I usually:
- a. Tell them my name immediately
 - b. Ask them why they can't get my name right
 - c. Figure it's not worth saying anything about
10. I think the best way to deal with competition is to:
- a. Try to do my best
 - b. Avoid competition as much as possible
 - c. Try to win no matter what
11. When someone is very demanding, I believe it is best to:
- a. Refuse to be pushed around and tell them to leave me alone
 - b. Tell them how I feel about the demands
 - c. Go along with the demands if I possibly can
12. If I want to go along a path blocked by people talking, I am likely to:
- a. Tell them to get out of my way
 - b. Go some other way
 - c. Ask them to let me through
13. If I disagree with someone else's opinion, I am likely to:
- a. Tell them they are wrong
 - b. Give them my opinion on the subject
 - c. Let it pass and say nothing
14. When someone's kidding at my expense, I tend to:
- a. Retaliate by kidding in the same way
 - b. State my feelings about the kidding
 - c. Let it pass and say nothing
15. When I am asked to volunteer my services for a charity, I tend to:

- a. Tell them I refuse to be imposed on
 - b. Do it whether I want to or not, because I hate to refuse
 - c. Decide on the basis of my time and interest
- 16.** If an unpleasant job has to be done around the house, I think it is best to:
- a. Force someone else to do it
 - b. Do it myself without saying anything
 - c. Discuss it with others involved
- 17.** If I want to end a phone conversation, I am likely to:
- a. Say I have something else to do now and can't talk any longer
 - b. Say I don't have all day to talk on the phone
 - c. Half-heartedly participate in the conversation and hope it will end
- 18.** If the hostess serves a dish I dislike, I think it's best to:
- a. Try to eat it anyway
 - b. Say how much I dislike the dish
 - c. Decline it in favor of something else
- 19.** If I want a certain seat in a restaurant, I am likely to:
- a. Ask for the seat I want before being seated
 - b. Get up and move to the seat I want without asking anyone
 - c. Hope I get it, but accept whatever I get
- 20.** When I don't want to do what my friends plan, I think it is best to:
- a. Do what I want and let them do what they want
 - b. Insist that they do what I want to do
 - c. Go along with the majority
- 21.** When I am asked where I want to go to eat, I usually:
- a. Insist on going to my favorite place
 - b. Decide where I'd like to go and suggest it
 - c. Say it doesn't matter
- 22.** When asking someone for a favor, I feel it is best to:
- a. Feel free to ask without any expectations
 - b. Insist that others do whatever I need
 - c. Ask only if it's absolutely necessary
- 23.** I think the best way to handle a put-down is to:
- a. Ignore it and pretend not to have noticed
 - b. Tell the person how I feel about it

- c. Retaliate and give it right back
24. When someone cuts in line in front of me, I usually:
- a. Say nothing to them
 - b. Tell them I don't want them to cut in line in front of me
 - c. Demand that they move to the back of the line
25. If I want better service at a restaurant than I am getting, I am likely to:
- a. Gripe about the service to myself but say nothing to anyone else
 - b. Be sarcastic to the waiter and not leave a tip
 - c. Ask for whatever service I need
26. When someone interrupts me in the middle of a sentence, I tend to:
- a. Ask them to wait a moment until I finish
 - b. Wait until I get another chance to finish what I was saying
 - c. Tell them they're rude to interrupt me
27. In giving my opinions, I feel it is best to:
- a. Present my opinions in an absolute way so that they can't be questioned
 - b. Say that I may be wrong, but that I think "so and so"
 - c. State my opinions without focusing on whether on whether they are seen as wrong
28. If I want to leave a party when no one else has left, I am likely to:
- a. Try to break up the party
 - b. Go ahead and leave when I want to
 - c. Stay until someone else leaves first
29. If I want something very badly, I am likely to:
- a. Hint at what I want and hope to get it
 - b. Ask for it in a very direct way
 - c. Insist that I get it
30. When a friend asks me to do a favor that creates a problem for me, I usually:
- a. Pretend it's no problem and go ahead and do it
 - b. Tell them I refuse to be taken advantage of
 - c. Acknowledge the problem it creates and explore alternatives

Part Two

Assuming a work setting, circle one letter (a, b, or c) for each item. Try to be honest in describing yourself rather than trying to pick the "right" answer.

31. If I want my superiors to notice my work, I am likely to:
- a. Demand to be recognized for my work
 - b. Work very hard and hope they recognize it

- c. Inform them of my work and commitment to the job
- 32.** If I am part of a discussion group, I am likely to:
- a. Leave most of the discussion to others
 - b. Try to control the outcome of the discussion
 - c. Take an active part in the discussion
- 33.** I feel the best way to get what I want is to:
- a. Be patient and hope things work out
 - b. Offer suggestions and assume that others will do the right thing
 - c. Tell others precisely what they must do and how to do it
- 34.** In being responsible for other people, I think it is best to:
- a. Give them clear guidelines to follow
 - b. Offer suggestions and assume they will do the right thing
 - c. Tell them precisely what they must do and how to do it
- 35.** If I have authority over others, I am likely to:
- a. Exercise my authority as needed
 - b. Try to avoid using my authority
 - c. Relish the authority and use it at every opportunity
- 36.** If I am proud of a job I've done, I am likely to:
- a. Share it with those who are interested in my work
 - b. Make a point of bragging about it at every opportunity
 - c. Say nothing about it, but hope people will notice it
- 37.** When I am pressured to hurry with my work, I tend to:
- a. Feel overwhelmed and just give up
 - b. Take it out on anyone or anything that interferes with me
 - c. Work as diligently as possible
- 38.** If I want more challenging work to do, I am likely to:
- a. Hint that I am caught up and could take on something else
 - b. Say that I want more challenging work and believe I can handle it
 - c. Gripe about the boring job I have and insist on something challenging
- 39.** If I want to know what my boss thinks of my work, I am likely to:
- a. Complain to my boss that I never get any feedback on my work
 - b. Ask my boss for a performance evaluation
 - c. Ask a co-worker to find out what my boss thinks of my work
- 40.** When someone points out a mistake to me, I usually:

- a. Feel embarrassed and try to keep others from knowing
 - b. Appreciate their pointing it out and focus on correcting it
 - c. Get angry and accuse them of being too critical
41. If I want to present my position on question to others, I am likely to:
- a. Try to justify my position
 - b. State what my position is and how I reached it
 - c. Insist that they accept my position
42. When I am asked a question and don't know the answer, I tend to:
- a. Say I don't know
 - b. Apologize for being so dumb
 - c. Blame someone else for not telling me
43. If I hear that someone has told lies about me, I think it is best to:
- a. Tell them what I heard and ask them about it
 - b. Tell some lies about them too
 - c. Say nothing to them, but avoid them in the future
44. When it comes to getting a job done right, I think it is best to:
- a. Rely on others to lead the way
 - b. Trust no one but myself to do it
 - c. Join with others in sharing responsibility for getting it done
45. In sharing new ideas with others, I think it best to:
- a. Offer the ideas: "Don't you think..."
 - b. State the ideas: "I think..."
 - c. Strongly present the ideas: "The best way is..."
46. When my judgment is questioned, I usually:
- a. Say I resent this attack on my ability
 - b. Deal with the questions to the best of my ability
 - c. Go blank and don't know what to say
47. If I make a mistake, I think it is best to:
- a. Hide it and hope no one finds out
 - b. Try to learn from it
 - c. Blame it on someone else
48. When the boss doesn't take my suggestions seriously, I usually:
- a. Wish I hadn't made the suggestion and not make any more
 - b. Demand to be taken seriously

- c. Restate my suggestion and my seriousness in making it
- 49.** I think the best way to deal with difficult people is to:
- a. Interact with them in a straightforward way
 - b. Be just as difficult as they are
 - c. Stay away from them as much as possible
- 50.** I believe the best way to handle a problem is to:
- a. Insist that it be settled immediately
 - b. Ignore it as much as possible
 - c. Get as much information about it as possible
- 51.** When my boss asks me to tell a story I'm uncomfortable with, I usually:
- a. Refuse to do it and say I shouldn't have been asked
 - b. Feel I have no choice but to do it without question
 - c. Acknowledge my discomfort with the situation
- 52.** If I want a day off work for some personal business, I am likely to:
- a. Take off and say I was sick
 - b. Explain my need and request the day off
 - c. Mean to ask, but never find a good time to ask
- 53.** When decisions are to be made, I believe it is best to:
- a. Make the decisions alone and dare anyone to challenge them
 - b. Share the responsibility for making them
 - c. Wait for someone else to make them
- 54.** If I want a group to listen to my ideas, I am likely to:
- a. Clearly state my ideas as often as necessary
 - b. Insist upon being heard because I know best
 - c. Try once, but not again if they don't listen
- 55.** When my authority is questioned, I tend to:
- a. Not take it personally
 - b. Take the offensive and set out to attack the other person
 - c. Get flustered and back off my position
- 56.** When I am asked my opinion about a new idea, I tend to:
- a. Challenge the idea to show how smart I am
 - b. Wait and see what others think of it before giving my opinion
 - c. Ask questions to get more information about it
- 57.** I think the best way to get a raise is to:
- a. Insist on my right to a raise

- b. Do good work and wait to be rewarded
- c. Do good work and ask for a raise based on the work

58. When a person asks my opinion and I know what opinion they want, I usually:

- a. Give my honest opinion
- b. Say what I'm expected to say
- c. Accuse the person of not really wanting my opinion

59. When I disagree with something I have been asked to do, I usually:

- a. Demand to do it my own way
- b. State my opinion about it and discuss it further
- c. Do it anyway rather than get into a discussion

60. If I plan to tell someone they are doing something wrong, I am likely to:

- a. Tell them as clearly and quickly as possible
- b. Dread it and postpone it as long as possible
- c. Use it as an opportunity to tell them everything I don't like

Group Evaluation

Number of Passive Answers: _____

Number of Assertive Answers: _____

Number of Aggressive Answers: _____

Ideas for Change

Improving Your Assertiveness Skills

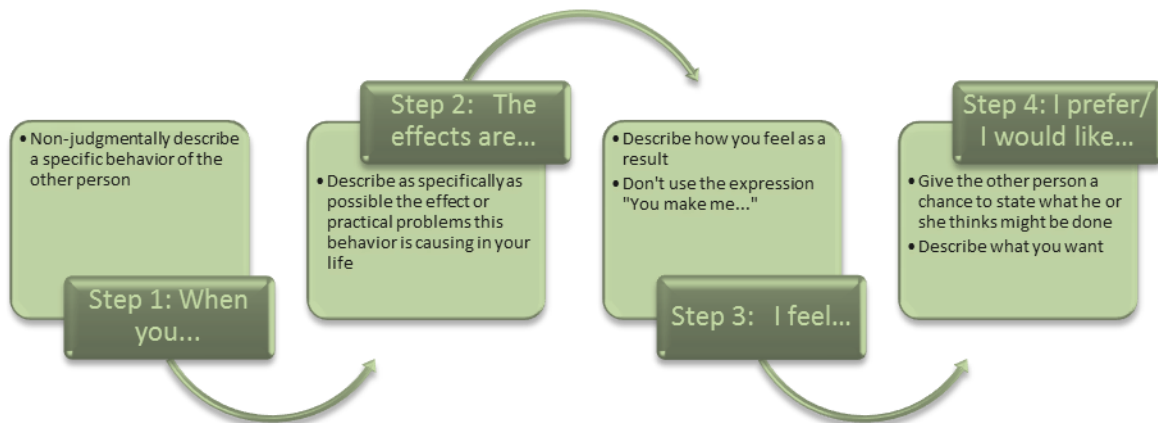
Dealing with Tough Issues

We are most likely to retain the goodwill of the person we're standing up to if we stick with our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and avoid direct or implied criticism of the other person. One way to do that is to stick with "I" messages expressed in a matter-of-fact, non-judgmental tone of voice.

"You" Message	Reworded as an "I" Message
You talk too loudly.	I have sensitive hearing.
You should send out an agenda.	I'd like to know what we're going to discuss in the meeting tomorrow, so I can bring the necessary information with me.

You can use this same type of message when you are giving feedback about someone else's behavior. Again, the feedback should be non-judgmental, but it should be specific.

There are four steps to this message.



Example:

1. "When you leave your papers scattered all over the office..."
2. "Both of us have a hard time finding them when you need them again."
3. "I feel like I'm responsible for tracking them down, but sometimes I don't even know where to start."
4. "I'd like you to put all those papers in one big pile in that basket on my desk. I could file them at the end of the day, and we would have them when we need them. Would that work for you?"

Remember: When you are stating feelings, state feelings directly, not evaluations or solutions.

Now that you have the tools to improve your assertiveness level, you may be pleasantly surprised at how readily others accept and respect your assertiveness. You must be prepared, however, for the occasional tough cookie who responds aggressively with verbal attacks, put-downs, or demands. When this happens, here are some techniques you can use to respond to the situation:

- Speak assertively, but with empathy, to show the other person you have received their message.

- Repeat your assertion by repeating your original response, while also responding to legitimate points made by the other person.
- Use active listening and open questions to clarify your understanding of the other person's position.

Think of situations where you could use this formula. Practice the wording to yourself and then try it out in a fairly non-stressful situation and see how it works. Like most things, it gets easier with practice.

**Pairs Exercise
Role Play Notes**

Communication Skills

We will be talking about communicating through writing and non-verbal communication a bit later, but with all forms of communication, understanding is the key. Worry less about whether or not others understand you, and worry more about your ability to understand other people.

What are some of the barriers we face?

- **The speaker's words.** If the speaker is hurried, uses complicated words, or speaks with an accent, they can be interpreted negatively.
- **The speaker's expression.** Looking stern, distracted, or disdainful can have a negative impression.
- **Tone of voice.** A sharp, loud, angry sounding voice can be interpreted negatively.
- **Body language.** Hands on hips, drumming fingers, or rolling eyes can be interpreted negatively.

Other barriers can include:

- Noise
- Distance
- Hearing difficulties
- Distractions
- Inattention
- Disinterest
- Emotions
- Experience
- Vocabulary
- Culture
- Educational level
- Moods

Asking and Listening

Asking Questions

The two most powerful communication skills we have, other than our non-verbal skills, are our abilities to listen and to ask questions. These are the tools we use to overcome our communication barriers, and this may surprise you, but most of us don't do either of them very well.

First, let's look at asking questions. There are two main types of questions: closed and open.

Closed Questions

Closed questions are those that can be answered by either “yes” or “no,” or with a specific bit of data, such as your name, date of birth, occupation, etc. These questions restrict our responses and give us little opportunity to develop our thoughts. As a result, they require little effort and can even close down a conversation.

Closed questions tend to be over-used, partially because they require very little effort on the questioner’s part as well. They are easy to phrase and we get quick answers. Unfortunately, such questions also can lead us to assume, and assumptions can be big barriers to good communication.

Open Questions

Open questions, on the other hand, encourage people to talk. These questions are phrased so they cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Open questions often begin with a variation of the five W’s, (who, what, when, where, why), or can ask how.

Examples

Open questions are used to:

- Get information
- Focus conversations
- Solicit opinions
- Gain consensus

The unintentional use of a closed question can often be overcome by following it with a simple open question. For example:

- "Do you feel that was the right thing to do?"
- "Yes, I do."
- "Can you help me understand why you feel that way?"

Clarifying Questions

Remember the saying from Stephen Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." You will want to gather information from others in order to understand them better. Most of us are better at presenting our own point of view than we are at drawing out information from others.

Here are some useful clarifying questions:

- What do you think we can do about this?
- What would you like me to stop doing?
- Would it be helpful if I...?
- Supposing we were to...?
- Can you help me understand where you're coming from?
- Can we set a time to discuss the changes we're both prepared to make?
- I'm prepared to... Would that ease the situation?

Active Listening

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the content of what is being said, as well as the attitude behind what is being said (is the speaker happy, angry, excited, or sad?).

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension to listening. Are they disgusted and angry, or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Really listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Are they stressing certain points?
- Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?

Demonstration Cues

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, providing you are being sincere.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as “Uh-huh,” “Go on,” “Really!” and “Then what?” You can use **questions** for clarification or **summarizing statements**. Examples:

- “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

- **Make a decision to listen.** Close your mind to clutter and noise, and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.
- **Don’t interrupt** people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions. Make comments when they have finished.
- Keep your **eyes** focused on the speaker and your **ears** tuned to their voice. Don’t let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.
- Carry a **notebook** or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise 8-10 times, you will be able to see what level your listening skills are currently at.
- While keeping in mind not to interrupt people, ask a few **questions** throughout the conversation when it’s polite to do so. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.
- When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be **infectious**. If you want people to communicate well at work, you have to set a high example.

Non-Verbal Messages

Non-verbal messages are, in fact, more important than the words we say. This can include the way we stand, what we do with our hands, the sound of our voice, the way we walk, and the expressions on our face.

Not that long ago, studies told us we only had four minutes to make a first impression. Today, we only have 90 seconds. In this fast-paced society, we don't have time to get more than a quick snapshot of how a person looks before we make up our mind about them. They are making up their mind about us at the same time, too.

Body Language

Much of our face-to-face communication happens through body language. While we deliver a message through words, we are also emphasizing, confirming, or even negating what we say through our tone of voice and our non-verbal body language.

The face and the eyes are the most expressive means of body communication. Additional positive or negative messages are sent by your gestures, posture, and the space between you and the other person.

Body language must be in tune with your words and tone, or you will send a mixed and often confusing message. Positive body language is important to supporting your words and ensuring complete understanding.

The Signals People Send

The chart below can be used as a guide to help you with some of the signals that people send.

Non-Verbal Communication	Interpretation
Facial Expressions	
Frown	Displeasure, unhappiness
Smile	Friendliness, happiness
Raised eyebrows	Disbelief, amazement
Narrowed eyes	Anger
Blushing	Embarrassment
Eye Contact	
Glancing	Lack of interest
Steady	Active listening, interest, seduction
Hand/Arm Gestures	
Pointing finger	Authority, displeasure, lecturing
Folded arms	Not open to change, preparing to speak
Arms at side	Open to suggestions, relaxed
Hands uplifted outward	Disbelief, puzzlement, uncertainty
Body Postures	

Fidgeting, doodling	Boredom
Hands on hips	Anger, defensiveness
Shrugging shoulders	Indifference
Squared stance or shoulders	Problem-solving, concern, listening
Biting lip, shifting, jingling money	Nervousness
Sitting on edge of chair	Listening, great concern
Slouching in chair	Boredom, lack of interest
Clothing	
Business dress	Authoritative, conservative
Sloppy attire	Disrespect, lack of responsibility
Casual clothes	Relaxation
Proxemics (Physical Space)	
From physical contact to 18 inches	Intimate space
From 18 inches to 4 feet	Personal space
From 4 feet to 8 feet	Social space
From 8 feet outward	Public space
Voice Characteristics	
Speaking loudly, quickly, and with clipped enunciation	Anger
Monotone and downward inflection	Boredom
High pitch, fast rate, loud volume, and upward inflection	Joy
Status Symbols	
Rare or expensive possessions	High status
Prestigious titles	High status

Writing Skills

The Four C's

Writing should be:

- **Clear**, so the reader can understand what is being said.
- **Concise**, without additional, unnecessary words.
- **Complete**, with all the information the reader needs to know.
- **Correct**, without spelling errors, typos, or grammatical errors.

Be clear.

- If a one-syllable word will do the job, use it.
- Stay away from jargon or words of the trade the reader might not understand.
- Don't be pretentious.
- Make your writing easy to read.

Be concise.

- Eliminate unnecessary words. Don't use long, wordy phrases when a single word will do. For example, write, "now," rather than, "at this point in time."
- Avoid vague words like "better" or "faster." How much better? How much faster?
- Don't create long, complex sentences by stringing phrases and clauses together carelessly.

Be complete.

- Answer the questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?
- Make a checklist of all the important points you want to cover. Check them off when the piece is done.
- Empathize with the reader. Ask yourself, "Have I told them everything they need to know?"

Be correct.

- We make most of our mechanical mistakes in four areas: grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling.
- None of us need to be walking dictionaries, punctuation guides, or spelling champions. Learn the most common errors, how to avoid them, and where to go for help when you need it.
- Most grammatical problems concern agreement and misplaced modifiers. Subject and verbs should agree in number. If the subject (noun or pronoun) is singular, the verb should be singular, too: e.g., "he is walking" is correct; "he are walking" is not, because "are" requires a plural subject ("we").

Punctuation Pointers

Commas

The comma (,) sets off or separates words or groups of words within sentences. Commas are the **most common punctuation mark** inside a sentence. However, the trend today is to use them only when absolutely necessary, or when omitting the comma would cause confusion.

Use a comma after a **long introductory phrase or clause**: "After working all day at the office, I went home for dinner." If the introductory material is short, forget the comma: "After work I went home for dinner."

Use a comma **if the sentence would be confusing without it**, as in: "The day before, I borrowed my boss's calculator."

Use a comma to **separate elements in a series**, including numbers in a list: "I enjoy drinking orange juice, tea, milk, and coffee." You also use it with **numbers**: "5, 7, and 9." (There are some style guides that omit the comma before "and," but you'll notice that we like it. The important thing is to make sure that you are being consistent, and that you use what your organization is using.)

Use a comma to separate **independent clauses that are joined** by and, but, or, nor, for, or yet. "We shopped for three hours, but we didn't make a single purchase."

Use commas to **set off nonessential elements in a sentence**. Compare these two sentences:

- In this sentence: "At the podium stood a man wearing a green suit," the phrase "wearing a green suit" is essential to identify which man.
- However, in this sentence: "At the podium stood Frank, wearing a green suit," the phrase "wearing a green suit," adds nonessential information about Frank.

You can also use a comma to:

- Separate a city or town from a state or province, as in Sarasota, Florida and Ferntree Gully, Victoria.
 - Set off the name in a direct address, as in, "Jane, can I please see you in my office?"
 - After dates, when day, month, and year are used, as in, "He was born Thursday, August 12th, 1975."
 - Before degrees that come after a name, as in Joan Walker, PhD.
 - Set off an informal quotation, as in: Robert remarked, "My investment counselor is very good."
 - After linking adverbs such as however, therefore, etc. "The hike was several miles long; however, the path was a good one."
- Separate thousands in numbers for clarification, as in 18,239.

NOTE: Not all countries use commas and periods in the same way or for numbers over a thousand or decimals. Make sure you know your audience!

When shouldn't we use commas?

- Do not use commas between two independent sentences.
- Do not use commas after titles like Jr. or Sr.
- Do not use a comma after a month when only the month and the year are used.

Note: If you use words like however, moreover, therefore, consequently, nevertheless, or then between two independent clauses (i.e., sentences by themselves), you must use one of the following:

- A period
- A semicolon
- A comma plus a conjunction between the two clauses

NOT, "It looked difficult, therefore, we did not try."

- BUT, "It looked difficult. Therefore, we did not try."
- OR, "It looked difficult; therefore, we did not try."
- OR, "It looked difficult, and therefore we did not try."

Semicolons

A semicolon (;) separates two independent clauses, but it keeps those two thoughts more tightly linked than a period can: "I type letters; he types bills."

The semi-colon sometimes raises people's blood pressure, but it is a very useful punctuation mark. A semi-colon has **three important features**:

- It is considered a more defined pause than the pause required by a comma.
- It is used to separate major sentence elements of equal grammatical rank.
- It is used to separate sentences joined by logical conjunctions such as however, therefore, thus, and nevertheless.

Example: "I learned all the rules and regulations; however, I never really learned to control the ball."

It can also be used to **separate two closely related sentences not joined by a conjunction**. The semi-colon in this instance is useful for showing contrast or balance.

Example: "Having more work to do is relatively easy to bear; what stings is having more to do than everyone else."

It should also be used to **separate a series** that is complicated or whose items containing internal punctuation (such as commas).

Example: "Please direct your comments to one of these individuals: Pat Warner, chair of the committee; Ross Ingram, public affairs; or Calvin Jenkins, promotions."

Use a semicolon before and a comma after the following words if the words come between two

independent clauses:

• Accordingly	• Likewise	• Otherwise
• Also	• Indeed	• Similarly
• Besides	• Instead	• Still
• Consequently	• Moreover	• Then
• Furthermore	• Namely	• Therefore
• Hence	• Nevertheless	• Thus
• However	• Nonetheless	

Examples:

- “I thought I had completed the project; consequently, I was surprised to hear about the additional work.”
- “We have prepared your estimate; however, you should sign it by Friday.”
- “The partner’s retreat will be held in March; therefore, all business matters will be discussed then.”

Colons

A colon (:) is a tip-off to **get ready for what’s next**: a list, a long quotation, or an explanation. It’s used to separate independent clauses when the second clause explains or amplifies the first.

- “Fred was proud of his sister: she had been promoted to managing partner.”
- “My new office contains the following items: a partner’s desk, a leather chair, and oak paneling.”
- “We need additional information: escrow statements, tax returns, approved bank loans, and mortgage agreements.”
- “There are two things to remember in a job interview: always arrive promptly, and always dress appropriately.”

Other common uses include:

- After the formal salutation in a business letter
- Before a list
- To separate hours and minutes (depends on culture)

Apostrophes

An **apostrophe** (‘) is commonly used to form the possessive of nouns and some pronouns and to mark the omission of letter(s) in a contraction.

Use an apostrophe when the meaning of “it’s” is “it is.” (Using it’s when the word does not mean “it is” is one of the most common mistakes in the English language!)

Note that it's never correct to use an apostrophe in a possessive version of its. This means that anytime you see "its" with an apostrophe after the s, it is incorrect.



Use an apostrophe to show **singular possession** ("The doctor's office was always busy") and **plural possession** ("The doctors' offices were always busy").

Note: The use of an apostrophe can be determined by inserting an of phrase, as in "The offices of the doctors were busy."

If the noun is **singular**, add "s":

- "I enjoyed Betty's presentation."
- "Someone's coat is in the lobby."

The same applies for the singular nouns ending in "s" like James: "This is James's new office."

Use an apostrophe to show **possession of two objects by two people**. "Hilda's and Janet's cars were crushed by the falling tree."

Use only one apostrophe when a **possession is shared by two people**. "Robert and Susan's house sold in five hours."

Use an apostrophe to show **possession in words that are already plural**. "The women's changing room at the gym was being renovated." Or, "The men's changing room had been renovated last year."

Use an apostrophe to show **contractions**. "They're on vacation and can't get back in time for the meeting."

Use an apostrophe to show **plural of lower case letters**. "I made sure that I dotted all my i's and crossed all my t's before I signed the contract."

Use an apostrophe to show **possession in a single compound noun**. "We are living in my mother-in-law's house until ours is finished."

Use an apostrophe to form the **possessive case of indefinite pronouns**. "This election could be anyone's win."

Use an apostrophe in **expressions of time or value**: two weeks' notice, two dollars' worth of nuts.

Spelling Tips and Tricks

Here are some tips for making your documents the best that they can be:

- Use a dictionary. It doesn't matter which form you use, but it is important that you be consistent.
- Use spell check on your computer, but don't rely on it totally since it often misses incorrect homonyms.
- Use the Internet or a telephone book to check spelling of names and addresses. However, there are sometimes errors in these sources, too. If you are not sure, simply call the office of the person you are contacting and ask.
- Proofread your work, and when possible, have someone else proofread your work.
- Learn some little tricks to help you remember words that you use frequently but still spell incorrectly, like "i before e, except after c."
- Make a list of your most common spelling errors and learn how to spell those words correctly. Keep that list posted so you can refer to it when you need to.

Proofreading

Proofreading carelessly can spoil a writer's best efforts. Proofreading is classic evidence that writing looks different to the writer and to the reader. Our brains really think that everything we do is correct, so we have a hard time recognizing our own errors.

To the writer, typographical or spelling errors may not mean all that much. So your finger slipped, or you always put two t's in "commitment." For the reader, an unfixed typo can transform the writer from a smart person into a careless writer in the twinkling of an eye.

It is impossible to read about "fist class work" or "shot meetings" without interrupting the flow of what you are reading. It may be unfair that proofreading matters so much, but it does.

If you can put yourself in the reader's position, you'll proofread obsessively, gripped by the fear that a mistake will turn you into a laughingstock! Learning some specific techniques, however, will help alleviate that problem as you become better at proofreading and create better documents.

Proofreading errors are different from punctuation or spelling or usage problems, and you fix them differently. Punctuation, spelling, and usage are knowledge problems, and you fix them by learning. Proofreading problems are usually a matter of seeing, and you fix them by learning to look. The better you read, the worse you'll proofread, unless you are consciously aware of what you are doing. Good readers and fast readers guess what the words are as they read the text, and they just check in

now and again to see if they are right. The more they can guess, the less they have to look and the faster and more efficiently they read.

To be a good proofreader, you have to go back to being a child again, or pretend that you are just learning to read in English. Look at every word as it comes along.

Letters and Memos

Here are some suggestions to make your letters and memos more professional and easier to write.

Use templates.

If your supervisor gives you a letter, notice its components, wording, etc., and use that as a guide for the next letter you have to create. Most companies have templates with their letterhead already inserted so that their brand and message is consistent. As well, many word processing programs come with pre-made templates that you can customize.

Another good tip is to save letters that come to you, even junk mail letters, if their phrasing, closing, etc. work for you. Use appropriate parts when you are creating letters.

Keep memos short.

Memos should only have one subject in them. They are used for internal documentation and are not intended to be sent outside of your organization.

Check and double-check your work.

Don't rely on spell check to find all your mistakes. Try to have somebody else read your work, or at least set it aside for a while before reading it again so that you approach it with a fresh mind later.

Have a good reference nearby and use it to check those things you are unsure of.

Getting Ahead

What Employees Want

Just what exactly would make you satisfied with your job? Below is a list of things that managers believe are important:

- A better relationship with your manager
- Career development opportunities and training
- Greater clarity about what the organization needs you to do and why
- Greater clarity about your own work preferences and career goals
- Improved cooperation among your coworkers
- More challenging work
- More flexible job conditions

- More opportunities to do what you do best

Take a moment and rate each of these items from 1 to 8, with 1 being the most important to your job satisfaction and 8 being the least important.

Item	My Rating	My Partner's Rating
A better relationship with your manager		
Career development opportunities and training		
Greater clarity about what the organization needs you to do and why		
Greater clarity about your own work preferences and career goals		
Improved cooperation among your coworkers		
More challenging work		
More flexible job conditions		
More opportunities to do what you do best		

Do you know what your supervisor wants from you?

Do you know how your supervisor will measure your performance?

Here's how employees ranked these items in surveys conducted in 2011 by Blessing White, a global consulting company.

1. More opportunities to do what you do best
2. Career development opportunities and training
3. More flexible job conditions
4. Improved cooperation among your coworkers
5. More challenging work
6. Greater clarity about what the organization needs you to do and why
7. A better relationship with your manager
8. Greater clarity about your own work preferences and career goals

(Source: http://www.blessingwhite.com/EEE_report.asp or http://www.blessingwhite.com/content/reports/BlessingWhite_2011_EE_Report.pdf)

You may want to share your thoughts with your supervisor as well. Quite often they are surprised by what we value from the workplace.

On the other side of the coin, most employees don't know what their supervisor expects. If you don't know, ask and find out. It may be accurate work, a clean desk at the end of the day, or a pleasant attitude. If you are doing a lot of work and completing all your assignments, but leaving an untidy desk at the end of the day, and that clean desk is what your supervisor judges you by, you will be the loser.

What Others Want

One essential way for you to be successful is to help other people get what they want.

If you find out what your supervisor considers valuable, and then make sure you give it to them and help them become successful, you will be more successful, too. Read any self-improvement book and you will learn that hard work, focused goals, and persistence are important, very important, in getting where you want to go in life. But so is helping other people achieve their success. Without them, you won't achieve yours.

Do you think there is anything else that is important in achieving your goals and enjoying your work life? Attitude!

Once you know what your supervisor wants and expects of you, you will be more productive because you know what your priorities are. You cannot only do things right, but you can also do the right things. This may mean giving up a couple of your own priorities for those of your supervisor, but that's okay. At least you have a common understanding of what the priority is. However, don't give up all of your priorities in favor of your supervisor's. Just make sure that their priorities are covered first.

Don't count on your job description to tell you what your priorities are. Job description duties are often a low payoff with little results. Get the basic duties done, but focus on the high-payoff actions, the activities that will help you and your boss be successful and help you develop and grow.

Self-Management

Self-Management

How would you respond to somebody who says:

- If it weren't for the traffic, I'd get to work on time.
- If it weren't for Hilda interrupting me, I'd get my work done.
- If it weren't for my boss changing their mind all the time, I'd know what I was doing.
- If it weren't for my _____, I'd be a happier person.
- If my children would pick up after themselves, I could keep the house clean.

Remember this old saying: **If it's to be it's up to me.**

There are some very straightforward things you can do in order to be successful. Routines are a good example of this. **Routines** simplify and create order, which is essential if you are in a state of chaos and high stress. When you introduce routine, you have energy left over to be wildly creative.

Top performers in every area of industry have lives that are well balanced by routine. Most of us have routines we follow in the morning. Think about your morning routine and how, if you skip it, you have a tougher time launching your day or can have forgotten something important (like leaving your lunch behind in the fridge!).

Routines allow you to concentrate on what's really important. Once you set them, they save you time and energy because you won't have to plan or think about them.

Consider your entire lifestyle. If you have an expensive lifestyle that consumes huge amounts of effort just to maintain, perhaps that time could be better spent doing more enjoyable things than maintaining homes, boats, cars, etc. Too cheap of a lifestyle has a similar result. If you spend hours negotiating the cheapest and the lowest rates, airfares, and gas prices, ask yourself if that is time truly well spent for what you managed to save.

Routines include setting time for family, for eating, for sleeping, for exercising, and anything else you do on a regular basis. Your morning routine should be so good that when you walk out of your house, you feel ready to tackle any problems the world throws at you.

Typically, you will work on one item at a time. If someone rushes in with something that must be done right away, you can place your current project in the priority box, switch to the emergency task, and then go back to your project right away.

The priority tray must be empty at the beginning and end of every day. Don't let it become a black hole!

The Incubator

Also known as a pending file system or a tickler file, the incubator will keep all documents that require follow-up in one place. This file should be placed within easy reach but out of sight. A good place might be the top of a filing cabinet, or, if space is short, on a windowsill.

Here is what you will need:

- A hanging file holder
- 12 hanging folders
- 31 manila folders
- Felt-tip marker and a pen

First, **label the hanging folders** with each month in the year. Arrange them chronologically with the current month in front. Then, **label the manila folders** from 1 to 31. Put the folders for today until the end of the month in this month's folder. Put the remainder of the folders in next month's folder.

So, if today is March 12, my incubator will look like this:

- March 12
 - 13
 - 14
 - 15
 - 16
 - Through to 31
- April
 - 1
 - 2
 - Through to 12

Now, **file any items** according to when you need to access it in order to complete it on time. So:

- A brochure that you need to review for a conference in June would be placed in the June folder.

- An invoice that needs to be paid by March 15 would be placed in the March 1 folder.
- A ticket for a concert on April 12 would be placed in the April 12 folder.

At the beginning of each day, take the folder for that day. Review its contents. Handle anything that you can right away, and place remaining items in your priority tray. Place the date folder in the next month. **At the end of the day**, if there is anything left in your priority tray, re-file it in the incubator. **When the month ends**, check the main folder for the next month and file any stray items by date.

If you don't have a lot of follow-up tasks, one hanging file folder might do the trick. However, we strongly recommend the incubator system. Try it for 30 days!

Being Proactive

One day a doctor realized she kept having a long line of patients waiting to see her—a line extending far out of her office and into the street. She already knew what was wrong with each patient. Each patient had a sprained ankle from stepping into the deep hole in the sidewalk out in front of the office. The doctor knew the source of her own dilemma. She was just too busy seeing patients in pain with sprained ankles. She never could take time to get someone in to repair the sidewalk.

What was the doctor's problem?

What would you suggest she do?

Ultimately, of course, the doctor's real problem was her lack of planning. We can't just keep reacting. We have to be proactive.

If we don't plan, nothing is likely to change for the better, and we are likely to be stressed out. Then we just keep making the same mistakes over and over, without looking for solutions and planning our strategy.

What are some guidelines to keep in mind when we think about planning?

- Once a plan has been made, schedule it.

- Know how much you can realistically accomplish in a day.
- Schedule your most difficult tasks for high-energy times of day.
- Check your to-do list three times a day to see if you are on schedule.
- Reward yourself when you accomplish a significant activity.
- Don't book 100% of your time. Leave a reserve for emergencies.
- If you have to travel across town to get to a meeting, make sure you schedule in travel time so that you can get there on time.

We plan, we put plans in place, we check to see if they worked, and if they don't work, we adjust or take further action. Tasks need to be done, and planning alone won't do it. Acting without planning will be less productive. Taking time to check to see whether we have done the right things will prevent us from having to learn from our mistakes.

Setting Goals

Setting Goals with SPIRIT

The SPIRIT Acronym

Most of us can't hit a target if we don't know where to look for it. Likewise, you have a better chance of reaching your goals if you follow some guidelines when you are making them. Peak performers write their goals down, look at them regularly, and make adjustments as needed. When you think of the things that you really want in life, write them down so that they have SPIRIT.

Specific

Be specific about what you want or don't want to achieve. The result should be tangible and measurable. "Look gorgeous" is pretty ambiguous; "Lose 20 pounds" is specific.

Prizes

Reward yourself at different points in the goal, particularly if it's long-term. If your goal is to set up a home office, for example, you might purchase a new desk when the room is cleared out and ready.

Individual

The goal must be something that you want to do. If your spouse wants you to lose 20 pounds but you think you look fine, you're not going to want to work towards the goal.

Review

Review your progress periodically. Does the goal make sense? Are you stuck? Do you need to adjust certain parts of it?

Inspiring

Frame the goal positively. Make it fun to accomplish. You could make a poster of the end result, frame it, and post it on the wall.

Time-Bound

Give yourself a deadline for achieving the goal. Even better, split the goal into small parts and give yourself a deadline for each item.

A Personal Action Plan

You know, most of us settle for much less than we can be. Don't settle for that. It takes work to make changes, but we can change — we just have to want that change badly enough to take action!

Many of us are full of ideas but short on taking real action to put those ideas into play. Maybe we try something once and then meet failure because we didn't think and plan the actions through. But you know what they say about the lottery: "You can't win if you don't buy a ticket." The same is true in life: "If you stop trying, you lose all chance of succeeding." Make a covenant with yourself saying that you will make an effort to put what you learn today into practice, especially when techniques will benefit you.

Working as a Team and with Difficult People

Working with Difficult People

Conflict occurs when emphasis is placed on the differences between people. The more differences there seem to be, the more divided you become. You get along better with people when the emphasis is on similarities. The difference between conflict with a friend and conflict with a difficult person is that with a friend, the conflict is tempered by things you have in common. Obviously, then, reducing differences is essential to your success in dealing with people you can't stand.

Here are some key tools for reducing conflict.

Blending

Blending is any behavior by which you reduce the differences between you and another person in order to meet them where they are and move to common ground. Blending increases your rapport with others. For example, have you ever been in conversation with someone when you unexpectedly discover

that you both grew up in the same place? In that moment of discovery, differences were reduced and you felt closer.

Or you go to a restaurant with a friend, look at the menu, and ask, “What are you having?” Your question may have had little to do with menu choices and a lot to do with sending a signal of friendship.

You blend with people in many ways. You blend visibly with your facial expression, degree of animation, and body posture. You blend verbally with your voice, volume, and speed. And you blend conceptually with your words.

As natural as it is to blend with people you like, or people with whom you share similar objectives, it is equally natural not to blend with people whom you perceive as difficult. The failure to blend has serious consequences, because without blending, the differences between you can become the basis for conflict.

For example, imagine that you and another person are both waiting in line at a busy grocery counter during a holiday rush. You have the sense that both of you think you are next in line. You have two choices. You can choose to ignore the other person and push persistently forward, or you can engage that person in conversation in an attempt to find common ground. Perhaps you are both shopping on your lunch hour, or you are both thinking about what you can cook for a quick dinner. If you can find common ground, you can then reduce the hostility that is building and break the negative cycle.

Saying, “It’s busy in here today, isn’t it?” lets the other person know that you see them. Saying, “I was distracted getting into line: were you here first, or was I?” lets them know that you are uncertain and focuses their response on action instead of both of you standing in line wondering.

Redirecting

Redirecting is any behavior by which you use rapport to change the outcome of your interactions and reach a more satisfactory outcome. Blending always precedes redirecting, whether you are listening to understand or speaking to be understood.

Identify Positive Intent

We can define positive intent as the good purpose meant to be served by a given communication or behavior. Our failure to recognize and appreciate positive intent can have lasting consequences.

A powerful key to bringing out the best in people at their worst is to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume a positive intent behind their problem behavior. Since your difficult person may be unaware of this, ask yourself what real purpose might be behind a person’s communication or behavior and acknowledge it. For example, someone may be upset because they have not received the service they required. They may be difficult toward you and make personal remarks, but the positive intent behind

their words is that they don't want special treatment, nor do they necessarily mean ill toward you. They just want to get what they asked for.

If you are not sure about that positive intent, be creative and make something up that could be true. Even if the intent you ascribe to the behavior isn't true, it will allow you to blend and develop rapport.

Identify Highly Valued Criteria

Criteria are the standards by which we measure whether ideas are good or not, the means for determining what a thing should be, and the benchmark by which people gauge whether they are for or against an idea. Criteria become especially important when differing ideas or points of view are being discussed.

Money, bonding, teamwork, or increasing knowledge are some of the things that may be important to us.

Whenever a discussion starts to degenerate into conflict, try to ascertain the reasons why people are for or against something. Then look for an idea or solution to the problem that blends these criteria together. That is another way to turn conflict into cooperation.

When Discussions Degenerate Into Conflict

When your problem person is talking:

- Blending visibly and audibly
- Backtracking or echoing some of their own words
- Clarifying their meaning, intent, and criteria
- Summarizing what you've heard
- Confirming to find out if you got it right

While blending is an important skill to use when dealing with others, never blend with a hostile gesture directed at you. Don't meet aggression with aggression. If the other person raises their voice or shakes their fist, the key to blending is to underplay it assertively.

Your action plan for angry, aggressive people should include:

- Hold your ground and use deep breathing to stay calm.
- Interrupt the attack by repeating their name several times.
- Quickly backtrack or echo their main point to show them you have been respectfully listening.
- Aim for the bottom line by taking ownership and expressing the situation from your point of view.

Some more important points to keep in mind when you are dealing with difficult people:

- No one cooperates with anyone who seems to be against them. In human relations there is no middle ground. Unconsciously people want to know, “Are you with me or against me?” That’s one of the things you have in common with your difficult people.
- Express your truth in a way that builds someone up rather than tears them down.
- Use “I” language, because “you” statements can be accusatory.
- Be specific about the problem behavior.
- Show them how their behavior is self-defeating.
- Suggest new behaviors or options.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to being honest with someone is concern about hurting their feelings. But you do no one a favor by withholding information and allowing them to continue behaviors that don’t work for them either.

Learning to Say No

Expressing Your No

Ways to Say No

Once you understand the request and decide you want to say no, choose the kind of no that best suits the person and situation. Below are some general rules to follow.

Say no **firmly and calmly**, without saying, “I’m sorry,” which weakens your position.

Say no, followed by a **straightforward explanation** of what you are feeling or what you are willing to do.

- “I’m uncomfortable doing that.”
- “I’m not willing to do that.”
- “I don’t want to do that.”
- “I don’t like to do that.”

Say no, and then give a **choice or alternative**.

- “I can’t help you now, but I will when I get this done, which could be in an hour.”
- “I don’t have time today, but I could help out the first thing tomorrow morning.”

Say no and then **clarify your reasons**. This does not include long-winded statements filled with excuses, justifications, and rationalizations. It’s enough that you do not want to say yes. Your clarification is given to provide the receiver with more information so they better understand your position.

Use your **natural no**. You may have developed your own style of saying no based on your past experience and personality. If so, use it.

Make an **empathetic listening statement** and then say no. You may paraphrase the content and feeling of the request, and then state your no.

Example: "I can see that it is important to you that one of my assistants gets your report done. I'd like to have someone do it, but my staff is already overburdened with high priority tasks to be completed by the end of the day."

Say yes, and then give your **reasons for not doing it or your alternative solution**. This approach is very interesting. You may want to use it in situations when you are willing to meet the request, but not at the time or in the way the other person wants it.

- "Yes, I would be willing to help you out, but I won't have time until tomorrow afternoon."
- "Yes, I could have part of your report typed, but not all forty pages."
- "Yes, I'd be willing to go along with your second alternative, but not the third one you suggested."

The Persistent Response

You can also use the persistent response. This method of saying no entails using a one-sentence refusal statement and persistently repeating it as often as necessary, no matter what the person says. This technique is useful when dealing with very aggressive or manipulative people who won't take no for an answer. It is especially useful when you want to move from the passive mode to the assertive mode, as it gives you a specific format to follow. This is also useful for moving yourself away from the extreme aggressive end of the continuum if you are apt to lose control and become verbally abusive. The persistent response can be effective in maintaining your refusal while continuing to be in charge of your emotions.

Because this way of saying no is unusual and a bit complex, we will provide some detailed guidelines for applying it.

First, select a concise, one-sentence statement and repeat it no matter what the other person says or does. Examples:

- "I understand how you feel, but I'm not willing..."
- "I'm not interested..."
- "I don't want to..."
- "I'm uncomfortable doing that, so I don't want to..."

- “You might be right, but I’m not interested.”

After each statement by the other person, say your persistent response sentence. It’s important that you don’t get sidetracked by responding to any other issue the other person brings up.

Guidelines for Saying No

Say your statement **firmly, calmly, and as unemotionally** as possible.

Be aware of your **nonverbal behavior**, making sure you are coming across as neither passive nor aggressive. Use plenty of silence to your advantage. Your silence will project the message that the other’s statements and manipulation are futile.

Be **persistent**. Simply state your response one more time than the other person makes their request, question, or statement. If the other person makes six statements, you make seven. If the other person makes three statements, you make four. Most often, the other person will feel ill at ease and stop after three or four statements. Other times, your response will move the other person to offer options you are willing to go along with.

Role Play

Sample Situations

- You tell a person who has called you that you are too busy to talk.
- Someone asks you for a ride home, but you’re late and the drive will take you out of your way.
- You do not have the time to give a co-worker the personal advice she is seeking.
- A co-worker often borrows small amounts of money which they do not return. They now want \$5.00.
- You terminate a conversation with a wordy person.

Case Studies

Scenario One

Whenever you want to meet with your supervisor they say that are always “too busy” and will see you “later,” but “later” never arrives. **How would you handle this?**

Scenario Four

Your supervisor is very absentminded. They frequently interrupt you to locate letters, files, and other materials. The supervisor always thinks that you have the material but after much wasted time, they turn up either in his office or in the office of another supervisor to whom the literature has been loaned. **How can you organize this supervisor?**

Scenario Five

An administrative assistant discovered that when the supervisor was out, another employee was entering the boss's office through the back door and looking through the personnel files kept on the desk. The administrative assistant spoke to the worker about the prying but it continued. **As the administrative assistant, what would you do?**

Scenario Six

Pat is ambitious and responsible. However, the two other administrative assistants she works with are unmotivated and have a different view of their jobs. For instance, when she stays late to finish an assignment, they make fun of her and say no one will appreciate the extra effort. **How can Pat communicate high standards to the co-workers?**

Scenario Seven

Clare frequently had to set up meetings for her supervisor with the assistants of the other supervisors. All her colleagues were helpful, except Rosa. Rosa put her off with comments like, “I have no idea whether my supervisor will be free on Friday at 10:00 a.m.” **How can Clare win Rosa’s co-operation?**

Scenario Eight

Two junior support staff were always coming to the senior assistant with gossip about the other people in the office. The senior assistant did not want to appear abrupt or superior to the two juniors nor did she/he want to get drawn into the conversations. **How should the senior assistant handle the two juniors?**

Deep Breathing

Loosen your clothes, close your eyes, mentally relax your body, and take ten or more deep breaths. Your goal is to breathe into the bottom of your lungs (where the oxygen is readily absorbed), not the usual upper lung breathing we do. Put your hand on your stomach and feel it move as you breathe in in order to make sure you are getting the air in good and deep. We call this **diaphragmatic breathing** because you are using your diaphragm muscle to breathe. When people are experiencing anxiety they are most often breathing into the upper area of their lungs rather than the bottom.

Each time you exhale, count silently: “one,” after the first breath, “two,” after the second breath, etc., up to at least ten. If you lose count, or find yourself working on thoughts as they pass through your mind, start your count over again. When you are finished, you should feel more calm and relaxed. (Your blood pressure will go down temporarily, too.) If you’re in a meeting, on the phone, or dealing with a customer, count in your head.

Visualize

Use positive imagery to boost your mood and enhance your visible performance. In your mind, picture a place that you love. Feel the sunshine on your face, or the breeze on your skin. See the things that you enjoy in great detail. If you are getting ready for a presentation or an interview, visualize yourself performing it perfectly, so that when you get to the event your mind thinks you’ve done it before. (This is a technique used by athletes and peak performance coaches.)

Music

Music has the power to soothe or to give us energy. It actually has healing power, too. Find a type of music that relaxes you, and play it when you need to calm down. When you feel tired and listless, play some rousing music (rather than relying on caffeine or other stimulants) to give you a pick-up.

Acupressure and Massage

Holding a fingertip to the point of most pain or tension and pressing very hard into the offending muscle for up to a minute can avert a headache or relieve tension. Have a friend or spouse learn how to do massage therapy and/or acupressure on tense muscles, since daily treatment is better than once or twice a month.

Laughter

Laughter is the best medicine of all. A good belly laugh can lower blood pressure, slow your adrenaline, and reverse the stomach acid that comes with negative responses. Be on the lookout for jokes and cartoons you can share with family and friends. For a smaller dose, find a cartoon or picture that always makes you smile and post it near your desk. (Just make sure it’s appropriate for all audiences!)

Replace Worry with Problem Solving

Focus on what you can do, and then go ahead and do it. Chronic worriers tend to focus on what they cannot do, what should be happening, or how things are going wrong. Replace worry with problem solving so that you identify where you can step in. Then, stop waiting for the perfect time and just get on and do it.

Meditation

The purpose of meditation is to free your mind from its normal busy activities. There are several different techniques that can be used. Some people use a word as a focal point (a mantra), while others suggest you focus on a color, your breathing, an abstract concept, or an object.

Here is a good process for meditation. Sit quietly with your eyes closed and relax all your muscles from head to toe. Become aware of your breathing. Breathe through your nose easily and naturally, in and out... Begin to silently repeat the word you have chosen or focus on the color you have chosen. In and out... Let distracting thoughts pass through your mind. Continue doing this for 15 to 20 minutes.

Resilience

Each stressful experience that you have prepares you to deal with one in the future. The more resilient you become, the less of an impact each of these events has on your mind and body. Lots of us go to great lengths to avoid stress, and although avoidance initially feels like you are doing alright, the reality is that stressful things come up in our life all the time. The better we are at handling them, the more resilient we become, and the healthier we can be.

Each stressful experience can lead us into a cycle of confusion and even anguish. If we stay with those feelings, however, things actually get worse. But if we make a decision to deal with those circumstances by problem solving and adapting, we develop resilience. This means that we can enjoy life more and be more successful.

As you encounter more stressors in life (and we all do), we can rely on the experience we've had in dealing with negative circumstances in order to cope. We get more effective at managing that cycle of confusion and anguish, problem solving, adapting, and moving on.