

# BEGIN RIGHT...STAY RIGHT

## Improving Communication Climates

Personal relationships, whether they occur at home or at work, are a lot like the weather. Some are fair and warm, whereas others are stormy and cold. Some relationships have stable climates, whereas others change dramatically—calm one moment and turbulent the next. Every relationship has a feeling, a pervasive mood that colors the interactions of the people involved. Although we can't change the external weather, we can change an interpersonal climate. Our behavior can contribute to the defensiveness and hostility of the climate or lead to more positive feelings.

The term **communication climate** refers to the emotional tone of a relationship. Have you ever held a job where backbiting, criticism, and suspicion were the norm? Or have you been lucky enough to hold a job where the atmosphere was positive, encouraging, and supportive? If you've experienced both, you know what a difference climate makes. And when you consider the importance a communication climate has on job satisfaction, work performance, and patient satisfaction, it is easy to see why creating a positive climate would be beneficial.

So what makes a communication climate positive or negative? In large part, the answer is surprisingly simple. The climate of a relationship is shaped by the degree to which people believe themselves to be valued by one another. Social scientists use the term **confirming communication** to describe messages that convey valuing, and **disconfirming communication** to describe those that show a lack of regard.

Like beauty, the decision about whether a message is confirming or disconfirming is up to the beholder. Even though there's no guarantee that others will receive your best attempts at confirming

messages the way you intend them, research shows that three increasingly positive types of messages have the best chance of being confirming.

### ★ *Recognition*

The most fundamental act of confirming is to recognize the other person. This seems easy and obvious and yet there are many times when we do not respond to others on this basic level. Failure to return a phone message, avoiding eye contact, and not approaching someone sends a negative message. Of course this lack of recognition may simply be an oversight—you might not notice the patient or colleague who is waiting to catch your attention. Nonetheless, if the other person perceives you as avoiding contact, the message has the effect of being disconfirming.

### ★ *Acknowledgment*

Acknowledging the ideas and feelings of others is a stronger form of confirmation. Listening is probably the most common form. More active acknowledgement includes asking questions, paraphrasing (a restatement of a message in another form or using other words to clarify meaning), and reflecting. Reflecting the speaker's thoughts and feelings can be a powerful way to offer support when others have problems.

### ★ *Endorsement*

Whereas acknowledgement means that you are interested in another's ideas, endorsement means that you agree with them or otherwise find them important. It's easy to see why endorsement is the strongest type of a confirming message because it communicates the highest form of valuing. The most obvious form is agreeing. It isn't necessary to agree completely with another person in

order to endorse her or his message. You can probably find something in the message that you can endorse. "I can see why you are so angry," even if you don't agree with his/her outburst.

In contrast, disconfirming communication shows a lack of regard for the other person, either by disputing or ignoring some important part of that person's message. The key to maintaining a positive climate while facing a disagreement is in the way you present your ideas. It is crucial to focus on the issue and not the person. Being ignored can be more disconfirming than being dismissed or attacked. Most experts agree that it is psychologically healthier to have someone disagree with you than ignore you.

As soon as two people start to communicate, a relational climate begins to develop. If a person's message is confirming, the climate is likely to be a positive one. If their message is disconfirming, the relationship is likely to be hostile, cold, or defensive.

Verbal messages certainly contribute to the climate of a relationship but many climate-shaping messages are nonverbal. The very act of approaching others is confirming, whereas avoiding them can be disconfirming. Smiles or frowns, the presence or absence of eye contact, tone of voice, the use of personal space—all these and other cues send messages about how the parties feel toward one another.

Consider what you can do either to maintain the existing climate of your workplace (if positive) or to change it (if negative).

# DISCONFIRMING MESSAGES

Disconfirming messages convey a lack of respect or appreciation. Like their confirming counterparts, these messages can negatively shape the climate of an entire environment or relationship. Even if you are on the receiving end of a disconfirming message, it is important to respond with confirming messages in order to support a positive communication climate.

## Generalized Complaining

Specific complaints can get problems out in the open but generalized complaining is usually disconfirming because it implies a character fault:

*I wish you would be friendlier. You need to have a more positive attitude.*

## Impervious Responses

Recognition is the most basic type of confirmation. By contrast, ignoring the other person's attempt to communicate characterizes an impervious response. Refusing to answer another person in a face-to-face conversation is the most obvious kind, though not the most common. Failing to return a phone call or answer an e-mail message are more common impervious responses. So is not responding to a smile or a gesture of hello.

## Interrupting

Beginning to speak before the other person has finished speaking can show a lack of concern about what the other person has to say. The occasionally interrupting response is not likely to be taken as a disconfirmation, but repeatedly interrupting a speaker can be both discouraging and irritating.

## Irrelevant Responses

A comment unrelated to what the other person has just said is an irrelevant response: *I'm really beat. Could we talk about it in a few minutes? I've never seen a day like this one.*

## Incongruous Response

An incongruous response contains two messages that seem to deny or contradict each other. Often at least one of these messages is nonverbal:

Statement: *I am finished with the additional work you asked me to perform—are you pleased with the outcome?*

Response: *Yes, thank you very much—I really appreciate your extra time. (said in a monotone voice while working on the computer).*

## Impersonal Responses

Impersonal responses are loaded with clichés and other statements that never truly respond to the speaker:

Statement 1: *I've been having some personal problems lately, and I'd like to take off work early a couple of afternoons to clear them up.*

Response 1: *Ah, yes. We all have personal problems. It seems to be a sign of the times.*

Statement 2: *I have been waiting a very long time to see the doctor. How much longer will it be?*

Response 2: *Everyone has to wait to see the doctor.*

## Ambiguous Responses

Ambiguous responses contain messages with more than one meaning, leaving the other party unsure of the responder's position:

Statement 1: *I'd like to get together with you soon. How about Tuesday?*

Response 1: *Uh, maybe so.*

Statement 1A: *Well, how about it? Can we talk Tuesday?*

Response 1A: *Oh, probably. See you later.*

## RESPONDING NONDEFENSIVELY TO CRITICISM

The world would be a happier place if everyone communicated supportively and assertively. But how can you respond nondefensively when others use disconfirming messages and attacking behaviors? Despite your best intentions, it's difficult to be responsible when you're being attacked. Because a counterattack is likely to not resolve a dispute, we need alternative ways of behaving. There are two ways that have been proven to be among the most valuable skills: 1) Seek More Information 2) Agree with the Critic.

### Seek More Information

The response of seeking more information makes good sense when you realize it's foolish to respond to a critical attack until you understand what the other person has said. Even attacks that on first consideration appear to be totally unjustified or foolish often prove to contain at least a grain of truth and sometimes much more. The key is to listen **open-mindedly** to the speaker's comments. Listening to understand and even acknowledging the most hostile comments doesn't mean you accept them—it just means you are attempting to understand the other person's point of view to solve the problem.

- **Ask For Specifics**—Often the vague attack of a critic is virtually useless even if you sincerely want to change or respond. Abstract attacks such as "You're being unfair" can be difficult to understand. In such cases it is a good idea to request more information. *What process/situation is unfair?* or *What do I do that's unfair?* Remember when asking for specifics to be mindful of your nonverbal communication such as tone of voice, facial expressions, posture, that may give the same words a radically different connotation.
- **Paraphrase the Speaker's Ideas**—this technique helps to draw out confused or reluctant speakers by paraphrasing their thoughts and feelings and using active listening skills. Paraphrasing is especially good in helping others solve their problems. By clarifying or amplifying what you understood critics to be saying, you'll learn more about their objections.

### Agree with the Critic

But, you protest, how can you honestly agree with criticisms that you don't believe are true? Virtually in every situation you can honestly accept the other person's point of view while still maintaining your own position.

- **Agree with the Facts**—Research suggests that this is highly effective in restoring a damaged reputation with a critic. You agree with your critic when the accusation is factually correct: *You're right; it was a very long wait.*
- **Agree with the Critic's Perception**—You can acknowledge your critic's right to see things differently than you: *I can understand why you think that \_\_\_\_\_.*

As a rule, people criticize your behavior only when some need of theirs is not being met. By seeking more information you will be on your way to having a better understanding of what need was not met. By agreeing with any critical facts and the critic's perception, you can help reduce defensiveness and hostility.

*Let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness.*

—John F. Kennedy