WORKING WITH OTHERS

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LESSON 1: SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION
INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration is a proven way of reaching across the globe, through time-zones and cultures, to get tasks done. While collaboration is widely understood as a term, many people don’t fully understand how to perform it in practice.

Collaboration on projects

The role of the project leader

The project leader ultimately sets the tone for a new collaboration project. A common mistake to assume at the start that everyone is aware of what needs to be done, just because they have been in a collaboration previously. So from the outset, the leader should paint a picture of success for the collaborative team, and outline the ‘end-in-mind’. This should include specific details on the performance that is required from individuals and from the team, the level of input or work needed, and the project roadmap and timescale. When everyone involved in a collaboration project knows what they have to do, for whom, by when, and to what standard, they become willing and effective participants, and are on the road to a successful conclusion.

The role of the team member

As an individual team member, you will need to establish trust between yourself and all of the various stakeholders on the project, and to demonstrate your own personal credibility. This takes work, and time, but is a vital step on the road to successful collaboration.

Establishing trust

To help establish yourself as a trustworthy, credible collaborator, be honest with yourself, right from the start, about what you are bringing to the table. Ask yourself questions like:

- Do you have time to work on this collaboration project?
- Do you have the right skill set for the job?
- Do you know enough about the subject?
- How committed are you to the project?
- Can you stand over the deadline?
- Are you ethical and do you hold sound values?
- Do you have the courage to engage meaningfully with others – and to challenge people when necessary?
- Is there a budget and do you have access to it?
- What authority do you have over the project?

By answering these questions honestly, you will get a sense of how successful a collaborator you are likely to be, how credible and trustworthy your co-collaborators will find you, and what areas you need to work on.

Maximizing credibility

From the start of the process, focus on taking concrete steps that maximize your personal credibility.
It is important to **be open and honest** in all of your communications within the wider team. Never over-promise, exaggerate, or withhold information. **Always** listen to different viewpoints without falling back on pre-conceived opinions or jumping to conclusions.

Try to **understand what knowledge or skills you are lacking**. Be up-front about this with your team, while doing whatever you can in the background to gain the skills or knowledge you lack.

**Realistically confirm your time commitments.** If you only have a couple of hours a week to devote to the project, or have a three-week vacation coming up, don’t commit to working on the project full-time for a month just to keep everyone happy. Only accept tasks that you can actually complete on time and to the stated requirements.

**Place yourself in the position of the other stakeholders.** Try to see their perspectives and the challenges that they face. If you can assist or guide them to success, then you are creating a more cohesive and trusting collaborative team that has a better chance of achieving lasting success.

**Enjoy the collaboration process** for both the learning value and social value. You should emerge from this process with a real sense of achievement, with an improved working relationship with your colleagues, and perhaps even with enhanced expertise and skills.

**BENEFITS OF TEAM COLLABORATION**

The benefits of effective team collaboration can be divided into two categories: project or process benefits, and personal benefits.

**Project and process benefits**

When a group comes together to collaborate, it inevitably results in the sharing of knowledge and experience. By the end of the collaboration, long-held beliefs are likely to have been challenged, established systems and work practices pulled apart, and workable shortcuts identified. As a result, specific skills and ‘hacks’ that help achieve project or task success get widely distributed throughout an organization and even become commonplace. This amplifies the positive impact of an effective collaborating team throughout the company, and future collaborations can build on its success.

At the end of a successful collaboration, team members themselves are better equipped to bring projects to fruition, having worked through various shared processes and systems in different cultures and environments. This, in turn, should eventually result in greater and wider organizational success.

Team members have also learnt how and when mistakes occur, and what they can learn from them. In effect, they become ‘bloodhounds’ who are constantly seeking to streamline and improve future projects, processes, and systems.

**Personal benefits**

Working with a group of people on a common project, with a common goal, is a powerful driver of personal success. Being part of an effective collaborating team can help you earn a reputation as a person who gets stuff done and who achieves results.

It can also help you to feel good. When you engage with others in the collaboration process, positive endorphins are released. You are more likely to experience powerful feelings like camaraderie and a sense of fun in your work environment. In addition, you enjoy an increased sense of personal worth from belonging to an effective team. If the team is successful with its assigned project, you will soon
start to recognize the powerful feelings generated by success, and will want to replicate those feelings again and again into the future. Success feels good.

As an individual within a collaborating team, life can be fast-paced and exciting. As you get used to working collaboratively, you will probably find that your own pace of work – and success rate – increases too.

After successful collaborations, individual achievements are likely to be recognized, formally acknowledged, and celebrated. You may find yourself getting promoted based on your involvement in a successful collaboration. At the very least, you will enjoy increased personal recognition throughout your organization, and will be more likely to be invited to join future team collaborations.

**How to reap benefits**

To reap the many benefits that collaboration can bring, aim to follow these guidelines:

- Always be open to new processes and people.
- Police your own team, and set high standards for your work practices.
- React positively and assertively to failure, in order to conquer it and get back on track.
- Suspend judgment on subjects in which you are not an expert.
- Be open and receptive to working with people who use different methods or approaches than you do.

Learn to work within the dynamic of a team collaboration. While it may seem faster to work on a solution on your own or with a very small cohort, it is in fact the wider collaborating team that does the real heavy lifting.

**OBSTACLES PREVENTING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION**

Individuals within a business frequently come together to collaborate on projects and tasks, with the aim of using their different strengths to solve problems and come up with solutions. That is all well and good, but if that team doesn't communicate well, it won't be effective. Poor communication is a major challenge to effective collaboration.

**Ensuring good communication**

So how can you ensure you communicate effectively with your team members during a collaboration? There are a number of good practices you can follow to do this.

- **Firstly, keep meetings as short as possible**, and follow a specific agenda.
- **Create a receptive atmosphere** for new ideas and challenges. Remember, no idea is a bad idea, there are no wrong answers, and everyone has a voice. In brainstorming sessions, try to stimulate wide-ranging and free-flowing discussions.
- **Send fewer emails; instead, talk to each other face to face, on the phone, via video, or through an electronic collaboration tool.**
- **Ensure visuals related to the current project are prominently displayed** in all open office spaces globally to help foster a collaborative culture.
- **Listen, listen again, and keep listening:** being able to listen in person, on a video call, or even to 'listen' accurately to the meaning in an email or other communication, is vitally important.
Don't constantly interrupt other people. We all have one thing in common when talking: we want to be listened to. You might think your constant interjections are a way of showing your level of engagement. But, in reality, they may make you come across as an impatient know-it-all or simply plain rude.

Avoid equating your own experiences with a colleague's experience. For example, if a colleague is explaining a difficult problem they are currently facing, don't immediately retort by saying "I know exactly what you mean!" and then launching into your own long-winded tale - it may turn out not to be similar at all.

Use your emotional intelligence to best effect by understanding that it is your capacity to be aware of, control, and express emotions, and handle interpersonal relationships judiciously, that will allow you to become a successful collaborator. This level of intelligence takes practice - and some courage - as it requires self-analysis and introspection. Possessing good emotional intelligence is the key to both personal and professional success, especially within collaborations.

Challenges

However, communication challenges are not the only obstacles that you will face as a collaborator. Your performance as an individual and within the collaborative team will also be affected by other challenges, such as:

- Undefined or unrealistic deadlines
- A poor sense of project direction
- Conflicting opinions on how to follow the collaborative roadmap
- Individual voices not being heard
- Too many strong opinions within the collaborating team
- Undefined roles within the collaboration
- A poor understanding of the restrictions placed on other collaborators; for example, their lack of resources or budget, family commitments, and so on
- Indecisive decision-makers at all levels
- Conflict amongst stakeholders for a variety of reasons; for example, because of unpopular decisions or a lack of communication from management
- Apathy amongst a small or large cohort within the collaboration team emanating from a lack of interest or respect, low enthusiasm, and a lack of concern for approaching deadlines
- Not enough managers, or too many managers making conflicting decisions
- A lack of technical understanding
- The ceding of decision-making authority to all stakeholders, or to non-stakeholders
- The corporate culture in terms of speed of response, resistance to providing commercial or market-sensitive information, or sharing research between departments

The list of potential challenges is endless...

However, being aware of the many obstacles that can prevent successful collaboration mean you are in a better position to recognize and overcome them when they arise.

PERSONAL SKILLS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

To operate successfully in a collaborative environment, whether that's within a team you are physically a part of, or one you have a remote relationship with, linked only by video or telephone, you must consider how you 'project' yourself on to others and how they perceive you and your abilities.
Also, you must consider your own capabilities when interacting with team members, as you lead, instruct, follow directions, respond to requests, and deal with conflict. In other words, you must be self-aware, and recognize your own strengths and weaknesses.

**Become self-aware**

You can gain useful insights into your own abilities and skills – and how others perceive you – by thinking about your interactions with others and then asking yourself the following questions:

- How do others view you and what are you like to work with?
- Can you accurately identify and assertively address the ‘elephant in the room’ when a situation requires such an intervention?
- Do you tune out when someone is speaking because you think you already have all of the answers?
- Are you able to hold an impartial viewpoint?
- Are you able to honestly comprehend what it is you can and cannot do, and what you should avoid or perhaps delegate?
- Can you suspend judgment on an issue that you do not yet possess a full understanding of?
- What mechanism do you use to gather all the facts?
- Do you give everyone the benefit of the doubt?
- Are you a critical thinker? Can you pause, ascertain all of the facts, and only then use your judgment, knowledge, and experience to formulate a reasoned response?
- Can you work within a team or do you prefer to work alone? Do you prefer to work alone and feed into a team remotely?
- Do you truly understand that collaboration means that project and task success comes from a team environment?

By answering these questions honestly, you should increase your self-awareness, and get a better sense of the personal skills you excel at – as well as the ones that need more work. You can then focus attention on improving your weaker personal skills and any shortcomings you have identified.

**Lead beyond your authority**

When collaborating, a very useful personal skill is the ability to ‘lead beyond your authority’. This skill is extremely helpful in a collaborative project, as it allows you to lead outside your direct circle of control, overcome the silo mentality that often exists between departments and teams, and move within and across different spheres to make change happen.

In a poorly managed situation, this kind of approach may be challenged and defeated. However, in an open and cohesive collaboration, all stakeholders should be encouraged to lead beyond their authority to ensure the success of the project or task.

**Practice active listening**

Another useful personal skill is the ability to practice active listening. Too often, people are waiting for their turn to talk or thinking about what to say next, instead of truly listening to the other person and viewing them with interest and curiosity.

Active listening is a four-step process:
1. Truly listen to the person - and be seen to physically listen. For example, make eye contact, nod your head, and give an occasional non-verbal ‘uh-huh’.

2. Feed-back your understanding of the person’s words to them, after they have finished speaking.

3. Confirm that you heard the person correctly.

4. Ask a relevant follow-up question to further clarify your understanding of the situation.

**Active listening in action**

Here is an example of how an entire team lost their ability to actively listen and question. I was once facilitating a workshop with a senior management team who were frequently using the term ‘EVC’ in their conversations. This term seemed to have many meanings and was used in multiple contexts.

When I questioned the meaning of the term, I was informed EVC stood for ‘Emerging Value Creation’. When I asked for further clarification as to what that meant in the context of our current conversation, it turned out that it was a term that a senior member of the team had read once in Newsweek magazine.

It turned out that EVC had become a frequently used term among the team - and among the team they collaborated with. Unfortunately, it was completely unrelated in any conceivable way to the work the team was actually doing, and was totally misleading. But group-think and a lack of active listening had allowed this term to establish itself. An effective member of a collaborating team will ensure this doesn't happen by listening intently and by challenging held beliefs.

**STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING TEAM COLLABORATION**

What tactics and strategies can you use to improve the effectiveness of your team collaborations and partnerships?

**Establish trust**

Well, effective team collaboration is solely based on trust and understanding. Without either of these, a collaboration is unlikely to get established or be successful.

So a key tactic you can use to improve the effectiveness of your collaborations is to continuously work to generate trust, understanding, and loyalty among your team. In fact, all stakeholders must work to generate these feelings, and everyone should be mindful of situations that can cause a breakdown in any of these areas.

**Have regular meetings**

A meeting, either face-to-face or via video or telephone, is one of the best ways to improve team collaboration. The meeting can be either informal or formal. It allows the project managers and leaders to brief the team on developments, identify the project roadmap and timelines, and talk about their expectations for success.

Meetings also provide the ideal opportunity to have crucial conversations about how the collaborative team is going to identify and respond to conflict and failure. Conflict and failure are inevitable parts of any collaboration process; they can occur whether the team is in the same room or in different time zones around the world. But while it is inevitable that they occur from time to time,
the team still needs to learn from them. People need to understand how, where, and when the failure or conflict occurred, and take steps to minimize the chances of them happening again.

Project leaders and managers should ensure that adequate procedures are in place to deal with conflict and failure. However, an overly regimental process may do more harm than good. Instead, ‘town halls’, open feedback discussions, or simply a coffee and a conversation with the affected parties can be very effective.

If a serious conflict arises, it is important to deal with the issue without delay. Teams sometimes use obscure code words or phrases to signify to all stakeholders in the room or across the collaborative network to temporarily ‘down tools’ and pause, as there is something of grave importance that needs to be addressed immediately. For example, phrases like ‘yellow taxi’ or ‘clear the decks’ could be used for this purpose. Obviously, for this to work, everyone needs to be made aware of the significance of the phrase from the start of the project.

It is also vitally important that solutions to failures, ‘hacks’, and newly discovered short-cuts in the collaborative process and technology systems are communicated frequently to all stakeholders. By sharing the knowledge in this way, everyone starts to work more effectively, which increases the chance of overall project success.

**Send fewer emails**

Another strategy you can use to enhance team collaboration is to send fewer emails. While email itself is an efficient medium, the human beings who create them frequently make mistakes. For example, people may forget to hit ‘reply all’ when replying to important emails, accidentally omit attachments, fail to check the spam folder for missing emails, or use very poor grammar, all of which can spell loss of productivity - and ultimately disaster - for any collaboration.

Investigate the many online collaboration tools on the market today. These can prove useful, as they offer open global access for all collaborators, allow real-time tracking of task assignments, and can be used to store the latest version of files and to archive material. At a local level, non-technical tools, such as flipcharts and whiteboards, are also effective, as people get to express and record their opinions in their own words.

**Have a trial run**

A final strategy is to have a trial run to measure how a newly established collaborating team is going to work together. Ideally, this would involve activities that test new roles and responsibilities, and identify barriers to communication, cultural differences, and, most importantly, the non-compatibility of certain participants. The most effective way of identifying these issues in the shortest possible time is for the collaborative team to **eat together.**

However, there is a twist: each stakeholder is assigned a role or a number of roles in the purchasing, preparation, cooking, serving, and clearing away of the meal. It is a most effective method of establishing team cohesiveness, and pinpointing people who have fun working and eating together.
LESSON 2: HOW TO BE A BETTER COMMUNICATOR
Have you ever realized that we operate on communication autopilot each and every day? Think about it! You cannot not communicate. Even when you’re silent, everything you do with your body sends a message. When you think you are doing nothing, you are still sending signals.

So obviously, we communicate with other people every day. However, to become a really good communicator, like with any skill, you have to practice it. Being seen, being heard, and being understood are not givens. You have to work hard to ensure that you are sending the correct message, and that it is understood.

The functions of communication

Communication serves five major functions. We use it to express feelings. We use it to inform and to influence. Sometimes we communicate simply to meet social expectations. In other words, people expect us to talk! And we sometimes communicate in order to imagine, whether for ourselves or to inspire greater creativity in others. And to do any of these things effectively, it follows that we need to communicate effectively.

Effective communication is particularly important in the workplace. It can bring real benefits, such as reducing unnecessary competition within departments. It also helps employees work together more harmoniously. This in turn results in more productive teams. And that leads to an enhanced service for customers.

Enhancing your communication

In the workplace, you are often judged on how effectively you communicate with others and how you project yourself to the people around you. This involves a lot more than simply being careful with the words you speak.

As well as watching your words, you need to pay attention to your nonverbal cues and gestures. These can make or break relationships and may have a significant impact on your success. So, to enhance your effectiveness as a communicator, ensure you pay particular attention to a number of key nonverbal cues.

Check your posture

A poor or slouching posture exudes indifference or carelessness. It tells the other person that you’re really not very interested in what they’re saying. And if you speak with a poor posture, you can undermine what you’re trying to say. At worst, your posture will distract the listener. To be perceived as confident, you must stand tall. It gives the outward appearance of credibility, strength, and vitality.

Be in sync

Try to be in sync with the person you’re communicating with. This doesn’t mean that you have to imitate them! However, remember that, when we like someone, we naturally match and mirror their voice, tone, tempo, body posture, and movements. This helps to establish a good rapport with the other person. And if you don’t ‘move in sync’ with your teammates, it can make you look like you’re not interested in them, are not a team player, or, in extreme cases, that you are lying. You are marking yourself out as being different from them.
Use your face and body to maximum effect

Have you ever communicated with someone who stood rigid with a poker face while they were talking? Even if they are telling you how enthusiastic they are about their project, their body gives off the message that they don’t really care, even if this isn’t the case. So when someone is talking to you, be sure to give them physical as well as verbal feedback. If you don’t give feedback physically, people think you don’t care, that you’re stuck up, or a host of other negative attributes.

Match your verbal and nonverbal messages

Have you ever had a situation where a person’s words say one thing, but their body says something else entirely? Perhaps they’re trying to tell you how calm and in control they are, while they fidget and twitch and nervously glance around them. You get confused by the mixed messages.

So make sure you match your verbal and nonverbal messages. Don’t say, “Yeah, that sounds great” in a monotone voice, while you cross your arms and roll your eyes. Speak enthusiastically and lean forward to show how engaged you are with the idea.

Smile

You don’t have to walk around all day with a great, big grin on your face. But, at the same time, don’t under-estimate the power of a smile! Smiling demonstrates confidence, openness, warmth, and energy. It also sets off the mirror neurons in your listener, instructing them to smile back.

However, don’t be accused of being a ‘perm-a-grinner’. If you smile too often, you might be perceived as insincere and misleading. Find a suitable balance.

Difficult communications

Even if you do manage to control your nonverbal cues, there will be situations when communication is difficult. For example, when you’re communicating with a client or your boss, or when making an important speech or presentation, it’s natural to sometimes feel uncomfortable, awkward, or nervous.

The most common negative physical reactions are ‘butterflies’ in your stomach, trembling or shaking, and a warbling voice. Although they can feel unpleasant, these are actually natural physical reactions to stressful situations. But bear in mind that they are merely short-term physical feelings. They are only temporary and last from a number of seconds to no more than a few minutes – maximum.

Don’t view them as negative. This is not your body going into lock-down because you are anxious or nervous. Instead, your body is simply gearing up to work at peak performance. So although you may be pumped full of adrenalin, have the shakes, and feel sick in your stomach, view all of these as signs that your body is ready to give you the very best performance it possibly can for you to deliver a knock-out presentation, win over that client, or whatever.

So get out there and practice your communication skills. Smile at and talk to strangers. Practice making a presentation. Lead a team in a project. Coach or mentor a colleague. All these activities, with practice, can enhance your skills and make you a better communicator!
DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Perhaps the most obvious way that you communicate is by speaking. However, you also communicate by the signals you send and receive each day through a multitude of nuances, gestures, and expressions. While these actions are voluntary, they are not always conscious. Indeed, we occasionally send and receive communication signals without even being aware that we are doing so. This can lead to disconnects or misleading messages.

However, this problem is also an opportunity because addressing these signals is the key to effective communication. In other words, if we can train ourselves to be aware of the signals we are constantly sending, then we can align our messages to what it is that we really want to say. And then our communication is no longer accidental and vague, but purposeful.

There are five types of communication to consider in the modern workplace: listening, visual communication, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, and written communication. Understanding these different communication styles and paying attention to which styles our teammates and our boss gravitate toward can improve our interpersonal skills, build trust, and help us get more done with less frustration.

Listening

When we think of communication, we often forget that all communication begins with listening! We listen to what is being said and what is not being said. Listening effectively involves active listening. This is a vital component of the communication model because if we cannot listen to the colleague or client sitting across from us, we cannot actively and effectively engage with them. Learn to listen as the basis of all good communication.

Visual communication

This conveys ideas and information in forms that can be seen. As you can imagine, this includes a broad spectrum of methods. Common methods include signs, drawings, graphic design, advertising, animations, and electronic resources. Have you ever considered why visual communication is so very effective? It’s because the human mind processes information in images. So it’s worth remembering that most people respond more quickly to visual images than to text.

Verbal communication

This is probably what most people think of when they think about communication. Verbal communication occurs face to face, over the telephone, or in a social media context via Skype or Zoom, and so on. Remember, however, that it is not just about the words used. It is also about the complexity of those words and how we thread them together to create an all-encompassing message. Pay particular attention to the intonation – including the pitch, tone, and cadence – used while speaking.

Tips for effective verbal communication

First, silence is good if it’s a natural contemplative pause in communication. Comfortable silences can enhance a conversation or diffuse tension. Also, use confident language, speak slowly and clearly, and aim to avoid filler words such as ‘um’, ‘uh.’ Ask questions to clarify and show interest. And seek common ground, even in conflict. Try to identify a shared interest with your conversation.
partner. Be sure to be prepared by doing research and knowing your subject. Think of the worst question you can be asked and know the answer.

Also, when necessary, use a **verbal bridge** to change subject. For example, bring up another topic to subtly shift the focus. You might say, “The important thing to remember is...” Be self-aware during an important or stressful conversation, by relaxing and acting normally – though remaining professional. And remember that, while words are important, when speaking face-to-face they cannot be separated from non-verbal communication.

**Non-verbal communication**

The physical message that we project through our body while we speak often says more than the actual words we use! Non-verbal communication includes facial expressions, body gestures, posture, eye contact, hand movements, and touch.

For example, if you’re engaged in a conversation with a decision maker about your cost-saving idea, pay attention to both their words and their non-verbal communication. They might say that they agree with your idea. However, their non-verbal cues – such as avoiding eye contact, rapid blinking, or feet direction – may indicate the exact opposite! So, when it comes to body language, pay attention, observe, and trust your intuition.

**Written communication**

Pay attention to this because poor writing skills often lead to confusion and embarrassment or even potential legal involvement. A golden rule in written communications in our digital age is to remember that your message will always be there and will be stored forever. So take care with your words!

In all written workplace communications, remember that poorly written messages and a sloppy or lazy style reflect badly on you and your organization. Ask yourself, “Is this message one that I am comfortable being connected with forever?”

**STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

Every day, you interact with your colleagues and clients. But how could you make these interactions more effective? Consider using these tried-and-tested strategies to improve your own communication skills.

**Pause for effect**

Pausing is especially useful if a conflict situation arises from what you have said. A pause allows things to cool. And the silence means you don’t say anything that may inflame the situation.

Long pauses happen in tense negotiations when the first person to speak is usually judged as being the ‘loser.’

**Use silence to regain control**

If you are speaking at a meeting and people are becoming distracted from listening to you and your message, try this very subtle trick. When you are speaking, look directly at the person who is now on their mobile phone or in conversation with another person. And then suddenly stop speaking. The person otherwise engaged is now aware that a change has occurred, and where there was noise,
now there is silence. So they turn their head to face the silence. You can then meet their face with a smile or a verbal request to put their phone away and tune back into the meeting.

However, don't do this too often, as there is a risk that you could appear passive-aggressive!

**Learn to listen**

By truly listening to another person and viewing them with interest and curiosity, you will substantially increase the impact of your shared communication rapport.

Active listening is a four-step process:

1. Truly listen to the person and be seen to physically listen. Cues include eye contact, face and torso in alignment, nodding your head and the occasional non-verbal ‘uh-huh’.
2. Feed-back the content and feeling and your understanding of the person's words.
3. Confirm you heard the person correctly.
4. Ask a relevant follow-up question to further clarify your understanding of their situation.

**Observe body language**

Do we observe enough of the signals we are being sent by other people? Probably not! When communicating with others, it is helpful to observe the other person – really observe the other person. Break down their bodies into specific areas requiring your constant focus.

- Study their **eyes**. If they are glancing upwards, it means they are thinking. Are they smiling? Is it spontaneous or forced? Real or not? And gaze at the face. Can they maintain a ‘face’ gaze without nervously turning away?
- Also watch for **hand signals**. For example, hidden hands, such as in pockets, is regarded as deceitful. If they are touching their mouth, it can indicate uncertainty. What about their blinking rate? It increases if stressed. And touching the mouth while blinking is regarded as a strong indication of telling lies.
- Check their **proximity**. Are they too close or not close enough? Are their arms folded? Folded arms with a smile signals a confident and relaxed attitude. But without a smile, folded arms can seem hostile.
- Observe the **head movement**. A slow nod shows interest, but a fast nod displays disinterest. And also observe the feet. If a person is talking to you while their feet are pointing away, it indicates a desire to leave.

**Ask questions**

If you are having a difficult conversation, or are in a conflict situation, asking a short yet impactful question can be particularly effective.

For example, if someone mentions AI, you could ask, “When you say ‘AI’ in this context, what exactly do you mean?” Using the word ‘context’ acts as a brake on the conversation, as the recipient of your conversation pauses to consider the context – the situation, perspective, or circumstance – in which they are referring to AI.

If the conflict is particularly serious, ask your question but without mentioning the particular subject of contention.
Asking a specific question will get you a specific answer. However, being intentionally vague followed by a pause, and then waiting, will allow you to gain much more information. Make your question ‘open-ended’ but with a pause and wait. For example, “Can you help me to understand why you feel that way?” Or “Help me understand why you think I am not doing my job properly.” Or “Can you explain to me why you talked across me at the last meeting?” After asking questions like these, pause and wait.

**Be prepared**

Be prepared – especially for unpredictable behavior. With normal everyday behavior, we can predict a great deal. We say ‘hello’ and we expect a response. Unpredictable behavior calls for more ‘defensive behavior’, akin to the driving behavior known as ‘defensive driving’.

Anticipation is your key tool in ‘defensive driving’. For example, you need to react quickly when a car changes lanes without warning. Anticipation is also your key tool in managing unpredictable behavior. Prepare a set of proven responses to a series of unpredictable behaviors. Rehearse your reactions. Trust your intuition because it is usually right. Indeed, it may be the only warning you’ll get that something is not quite as it should be.

**Use action words and verbs**

When you use action words, you sound assertive and confident. You spur others to action. They are instant in their impact and are of themselves an immediate call to action. Use verbs that have a clear meaning, such as ‘evaluate’, ‘manage’, and ‘advise’. These immediately make clear what action is taking place.

**Match another’s perspective**

This enables you to accurately understand their mindset and the environmental conditions that led them there. Your aim is to acquire a perspective and not just stick to your own certain perspective.

**Avoid making others feel manipulated or pressured**

Be aware of the signals you are sending – and any negative signals that you are receiving. To be successful at effective and influential communications, you need to understand the four human behaviors:

- **Aggressive** people aim to satisfy their own needs first, rather than other people’s needs.
- **Passive** people put other people’s needs before their own.
- **Passive-aggressive** people find it difficult to assert themselves directly, and may often feel powerless or build up resentment against others.
- **Assertive** people feel good about themselves and help others to feel good too.

Good communicators are assertive. They practice and hone their communication skills by approaching each task and having the courage and self-confidence to discuss, argue, and negotiate about anything. They are not afraid to express their opinion and advocate for it. However, they do not manipulate or pressurize people. They are simply being assertive.
Use negative assertion or negative enquiry

While communicating, being negative is considered to be a bad thing. However, there are two very powerful types of verbal negativity that can be applied to very positive effect in your communications. These are negative assertion and negative enquiry.

**Negative assertion**

This skill enables you to state something negative about yourself, and own your weaknesses and mistakes assertively.

Suppose someone makes a fair criticism of you, or perhaps your company. For example, “Your product is too expensive.” You could agree with them and say, “Yes, it is indeed expensive.” You are being honest and could benefit from this criticism. The critic in turn knows that you have listened and are considering what they have said.

However, you can take this further. You could agree with the statement and then turn it into a positive. For example, you might say, “Yes, it is expensive. However, it is a best-in-class product and has been proven to last longer than competitor products.” This is very powerful and, as often as not, your critic will be temporarily disarmed by this response.

**Negative enquiry**

This skill allows you to invite criticism, so that you can find out precisely why someone is angry, displeased, or critical of something you have said or done. It is called negative enquiry because you ask specific questions which could result in you hearing something negative about yourself.

For example, you might ask, “How can I improve my performance at meetings?” or “What do you not like about my work?” The good news is that with this approach, you will soon be in a position where you have more knowledge and can respond more accurately to the given situation.

Both of these types of verbal negativity are useful tools to have in your communication toolkit when honing your communication skills.