



Improving Communication

Communication is a two-way street. It takes **good speaking skills** AND **good listening skills** to create really good communication. Communication is important everywhere, but prison neighborhoods are particularly hungry for improved communication.

In a prison, good communication can create peace in the face of violence. Challenges to good communication are everywhere. When you have an “Us vs. Them” mentality between residents and staff, and recognize the fact that people are forced to live in close quarters with neighbors they did not choose in an atmosphere thick with tension, **a real effort has to be made** for people to communicate well with one another.

In addition, communicating with **loved ones on the outside** is challenging in so many ways — limits on time to talk or chances to speak face to face, hurt from past damage done to your relationship, and lack of trust are only a few of the barriers. So, **BRAVO!** for deciding to improve communication with the people in your life!

If you develop better skills as a listener and as a speaker, it will have a positive contagious impact. People around you will subconsciously pick up on positive changes in your style of communication, and may begin to improve their own communication because of your influence, without you ever explaining the change at all!

THE BASICS

Communication between humans is primarily for one or more of these three purposes:

- to give someone important information
- to persuade someone to agree with an opinion
- to build a relationship between two or more people

SPEAKING

Some people are naturally good at expressing themselves with spoken words. Some people really struggle with it. And some people THINK they are good at it, but everyone around them privately disagrees! The goal in speaking is **to be understood AND to build relationship** with the listener. Lots of things can get in the way of reaching that goal.

TRY TO AVOID...

◆ **...talking too much.**

Talking **at** someone, rather than talking **with** them, is a serious barrier to good communication. Talking with authority about things you don't really know much about convinces no one for long. Listen as much as you talk, and only talk about what you actually know.

◆ **...vague and rambling words that leave people confused.**

The listener can't understand you if you aren't clear about what you really want them to take away from the conversation. If you give too many unimportant details, or won't clearly state what you are asking them for, you leave them confused.

◆ **...negative body language.**

Non-verbal communication is really powerful! Ask yourself, “*What do I LOOK like I am saying? If someone was watching me from across the yard, what would they assume?*”

◆ **...over-the-top emotions OR no-show of emotion at all.**

Prison is a place where showing emotion (other than anger or boredom) feels dangerous. But the lack of honest emotion in communication with others makes life less connected. The key is to recognize **how much emotion is appropriate in a situation.**

Honest gratitude: Even a staffer can be thanked without it appearing to be inappropriate, as long as you don't over-do the thank you. **Saying "thank you," often**, but in a low-key way, will build positivity and tear down the assumption that a resident is trying to manipulate staff.

Remember that we are all humans with feelings. Let someone know that you are sad by saying, *"Everyone goes through hard days. This is one of those for me."* This communicates that you have **compassion** for others on their hard days, as well as that you hope people will show you some compassion today.

The phrase, *"I respect the way you did that,"* is a great way to communicate **friendship, trust, or admiration** without going overboard and trying to impress.

AIM FOR THIS:

☆ **Be brave enough to risk being misunderstood, or offending someone.**

There is always a degree of risk when you try to communicate. Some people shut down and stay silent for fear of offending someone or being misunderstood. But humans NEED connection to others through conversation (and silence communicates something all by itself, anyway). So speak up, but do it wisely.

If you worry that you will be misunderstood, try writing out what you want to say ahead of time.

Look it over at a few different moments, and see if you can fine-tune it to be as clear as possible.

Ask yourself, *"What's the number-one, most important thing I want them to take away from this conversation?"*

If you worry that you will offend the other person, follow a couple of simple rules for offering critique or asking for what you need.

- Use "I" statements, rather than "you" statements. *"I prefer not to talk to you about my wife. I don't want to talk about her unless I am the one who brings her up,"* comes across much better than, *"You have to stop asking me questions about my wife! You push me for information."*
- Sandwich the negative feedback, or your request for something, between two pieces of honest, positive feedback or observation. This is sometimes called a **plus-minus-plus** strategy.

For example, *"Hey, I appreciated you going out quietly and letting me sleep when I was feeling so cruddy this morning. If you could turn the tv down now, or put your headphones on, that would really help me get some more rest. Thanks for helping me get over this thing. I'll try not to pass it to you!"*

Or, with staff, *"I know you've been here a lot of hours already, and you must be tired, but I really need that call to get made to maintenance about the leak in our cell. I hate to make extra work, but I'd really appreciate it if you could find a way to squeeze that in before your shift is over."*

One warning, though: **this stuff has to be sincere.** Don't offer flattery, or fake compassion for someone. Find something that you truly DO believe to be positive, or worthy of compassion. If you can't do it honestly, don't do it at all.

☆ **Decide to be hopeful.**

If you have had only frustrating communication with someone in the past, don't assume there's no hope of change. Lots of people need to see consistent, respectful communication over time from you before they will trust you enough to respond in a better way. Yes, hope is hard to come by in a prison. But choosing to believe that someone CAN change may be the key to a good relationship with that person down the road, saving you all sorts of trouble you might otherwise encounter.

☆ **Stand up to your fear of being ignored or belittled.**

Nobody wants to be ignored or put down. But by changing your GOAL in speaking to someone, you take away their power to hurt you, even if they do ignore you or make fun. Often, our goal is to be heard and understood, and for good to be the result. But a different goal is sometimes called for.

If you have reason to believe you will be ignored or put down, you can decide that your goal for speaking right here and now is to know, in your own heart, that **you spoke something true and did it in a respectful manner.**

The other person has no power to keep you from achieving that goal. No matter whether they listen to you or not, whether or not they laugh at you for saying it, you walk away knowing that you

achieved your goal — you spoke truth, and you spoke it respectfully. You can walk proud in that accomplishment, regardless of anyone's response.

☆ **Start simple, and add details if asked.**

If you aren't sure how interested someone will be in what you have to say to them, keep it simple. Tell them only the basic information you hope they will take away with them. If they seem interested and ask for more, you can always keep going!

☆ **Ask for feedback.**

If it's very important that someone understand or remember what you told them, respectfully ask them to say it back to you. "*In case I didn't communicate that well...what did YOU just hear?*" is a great question to ask.

☆ **Choose questions instead of commands.**

People don't like to be told what to do, and in prison neighborhoods, someone is constantly telling you what to do! Avoid anything that sounds like an order, and instead ask questions that lead to helpful actions. For example, "*You've heard what I'm concerned about, so do you have ideas for how we can make things better?*" The outcome of a conflict where everyone feels like they won something (rather than "one winner - one loser") is better for the environment. Aim for a win-win.

☆ **Patience is always helpful.**

You already had lots of time to think about what you wanted to say. The person you are speaking to just heard it for the first time. Be patient. Don't expect an immediate response that shows they understand and agree. They may need to go away and think about it before they are sure how they want to respond at all. Give them time to process.

☆ **Be respectful of power dynamics.**

In many conversations, one person is clearly the "power" over the other person. A staffer talking to a resident about rules has the power in that moment. A long-time resident talking to a newbie has the power in that moment. A person who is respected by many in the neighborhood has the momentary power in a conversation with someone who is disliked.

Notice the power dynamic, and be respectful of it. If you have the power, be gracious, and do what you can to make the playing field seem level. If you do not have the power, remember to choose respectful words that communicate a desire for cooperation rather than conflict.

☆ **Be sensitive to generation gaps.**

People whose ages are very different may use the same words but mean different things by them. Ask a person to clarify, if what they say seems strange to you, especially if they are significantly older or younger than you are.

☆ **Greet hostile silence with grace.**

Some people use silence as a weapon. If someone says something they don't like, they stare and go silent. It can be either inflammatory or intimidating. Instead of exploding in anger or cowering in fear, take a deep breath, SMILE, and end the conversation with, "*Thanks for listening.*" Walk away. You just achieved your goal — truth spoken with respect.

LISTENING

"*You're such a good listener!*" Some people just ARE, right? But anyone can learn to be a better listener. Remember that the goal in listening is to learn information AND build relationship with the speaker.

TRY TO AVOID...

- ◆ **...multitasking.** If you can, stop what you're doing and give the speaker your full attention.
- ◆ **...jumping to conclusions.** The first few words, or even the first few sentences may not give you a very clear idea of what the speaker is trying to say. Let them have a couple of minutes to speak before you allow yourself to decide what this conversation is all about.
- ◆ **...negative non-verbals.** The look on your face, rolling your eyes, frowning, crossing your arms, sighing — these things all communicate to the speaker that you don't like what they are saying, and probably don't like them, either. You are not going to get helpful information OR build a

healthier relationship with another person if your body language and facial expressions say, *“I don’t like you, you know.”*

- ◆ **...agreeing too quickly.** If you are being asked to do something, or asked if you agree with an opinion, and you have not thought about it before, avoid saying yes to something you will later regret being a part of. *“Let me give that some thought. I’ll get back to you,”* can be a helpful response.
- ◆ **...thinking about what you will say next, while they are still talking.** Good listening requires thinking about what the other person is communicating, and planning our own next words distracts us from that job.
- ◆ **...becoming defensive.** Listening carefully to criticism will often allow you to learn something true and important about the effect you have on others, if you resist the urge to defend yourself. Even if you eventually decide that this person is wrong about you, it will be helpful to you to know that some people think that way about you.
- ◆ **...saying, “I know,” too often.** We never fully know how someone else feels. We may know part of a story, but not the piece the speaker is trying to share. We don’t know for sure what they are about to say, so it is wise to let them finish sharing what’s on their mind before we cut them off with, *“Yeah, I know.”*

AIM FOR THIS:

- ☆ **Listen actively.** Give the speaker your full attention. Look at them. Offer encouraging expressions like a smile, or a nod. Make it clear that you are tracking with what they are saying, and not daydreaming.
- ☆ **Concentrate on the content.** Pay attention to what is being said, even if you don’t like the way someone is saying it. You may miss out on valuable information if you don’t.
- ☆ **Listen for underlying emotions.** Think about whether this person seems afraid (fear often masquerades as anger). Think about whether you hear a hope, or a request that is unspoken, but obvious to anyone who is paying close attention.
- ☆ **Ask for clarification.** If the speaker says something that irritates, or surprises, or worries you, try reflecting back (like a mirror) what you THOUGHT you heard them communicating. For example, *“So hang on a sec. What I think you’re telling me is that _____. Did I understand that correctly?”* Give them the chance to correct a misunderstanding before it gets out of hand.
- ☆ **Disagree respectfully.** If you disagree with the speaker, you might not even need to tell them at all! Sometimes you can just drop a subject, rather than getting into it. It is possible the speaker already KNOWS how you feel, but needs to be heard, plain and simple. If, however, you feel that it **is** important to speak your mind in response, do it respectfully. Speak to them the way you would hope they would speak to you. No name calling. No insults. Keep it classy.
- ☆ **Ask open-ended questions.** If you are trying to get to know someone, trying to re-establish closeness to a loved one who has been estranged from you, or in any other conversation that is more about relationship than it is about information, avoid asking questions that can be answered with yes or no. Instead, ask questions that will keep the conversation going. *“What are some things you like about that?” “How did you feel when you got back home?” “Tell me about how you got interested in that?”*
- ☆ **Be a “wonder-full” listener.** If someone behaves strangely, is rude when you would not have expected it, or chattering when they are typically quiet...allow yourself to **wonder why**. Rather than judging them for acting in a way that you find troublesome, wonder why. Even if you aren’t able to come up with a reason, the process of wondering about it will remind you that we are all humans, all complicated, and all trying to handle life on good days and bad. It’s easier to overlook an offense or irritation from someone if you have taken a moment to wonder what might be causing their behavior.

**You got this! Practice, practice, practice.
Good communication is worth the effort!**