

Communicating and working with others



Learner Guide

Supporting:

FPICOR2202B: Communicate and interact effectively in the workplace

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Acknowledgements, copyright and disclaimer

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

People communicate with others all the time. Sometimes it's through talking to each other, sometimes via written notes or documents, and other times just through the way they look or even stand.

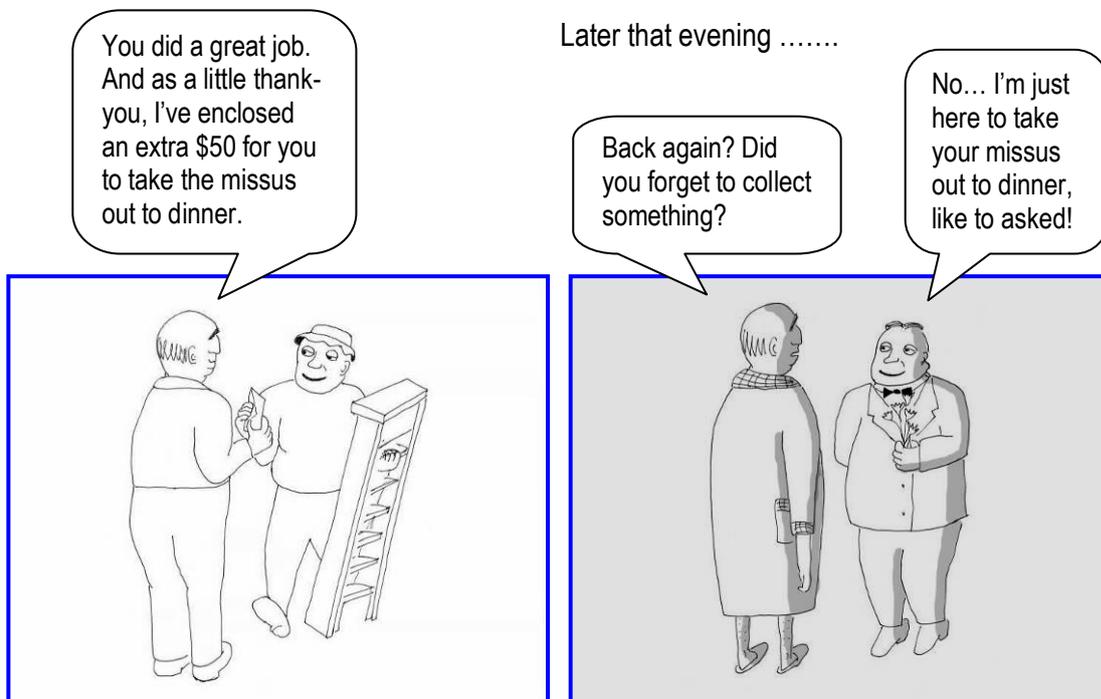
This module will cover different aspects of workplace communication. Once we've established what good communication is, we'll examine how you can apply these principles in your day-to-day work. We'll also look at ways of ensuring that meetings make the most of everyone's time.



But first, we need to ask:

Why is good communication so important?

To help answer the question, let's have a look at an interaction between a home owner and his visiting tradesman.



There has obviously been some mis-communication here. What do you think has gone wrong?

Good communication stops misunderstandings from occurring. It's easy to see why this is so important in the workplace. Good communication helps workers to:

- avoid making mistakes
- avoid accidents
- improve productivity
- avoid unnecessary conflict
- feel happier at work.

In this unit, we'll look at the three basic types of communication:

- **verbal**, including face-to-face talking, and using the two-way radio or telephone
- **written**, such as workplace documents, emails, and customer orders
- **non-verbal**, which includes all the other forms of communication that don't involve using words.

Learning activity



How good a communicator are you?

The questionnaire below is designed to help you identify which aspects of communication you're good at, and which areas you may need to work on.

Answer YES or NO to the following questions.

1. I have usually thought through what I'm going to say before I say it.
2. My speaking voice is usually clear and I avoid mumbling.
3. Sometimes I use technical words that other people may not understand.
4. I am able to listen attentively for 10 minutes without losing concentration.
5. When I am listening, I stay open-minded until the speaker has finished.
6. I tend to interrupt other people while they are talking.
7. When someone looks puzzled, I ask them if they understood what I said.
8. I'm a bit shy about asking questions if I'm not sure what someone else has said.

As you go through the following sections of this module, think about the areas of your own communication style that may need improvement, and how you can apply the principles being discussed to your day-to-day interactions with others.

Speaking and listening

Verbal communication takes place whenever you speak or listen to someone.

Its biggest **advantages** are that it:

- is immediate and direct
- lets other people query what you're saying
- allows you to discuss issues and sort out problems on the spot.

However, its **disadvantages** are that:

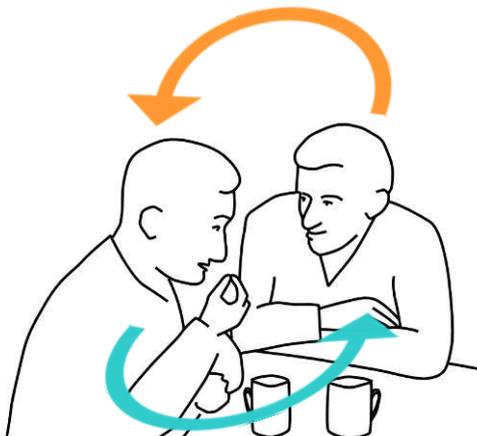
- spoken words can sometimes be misheard, especially if you're in a noisy area
- the whole message might not always get through, particularly if the speaker is in a hurry, or the listener isn't taking an active interest in what you're saying.

Nonetheless, verbal communication is used everywhere. It is the simplest and quickest way of having a conversation, and of giving instructions or discussing issues on the spot.



Good verbal communication

Good verbal communication doesn't just happen – it requires work from both the **speaker** (sender of the message), and the **listener** (receiver of the message).



The sender needs to make sure the other person understands what they're saying, and the receiver needs to concentrate on what's being said, and clarify anything that doesn't make sense.

This two-way process requires **feedback** from both people. If there's no feedback, neither of them can be sure that they're both on the same wavelength.

That's why your motto should always be:

I never know what I have said until I listen to the response it gets.

Feedback can take various forms. For example, if you're the speaker, you should look for signals that show the listener understands what you're saying, invite them to ask questions if they need something clarified, and ask them for feedback once you've finished. And if you're the listener, you could nod to indicate you understand what you're being told, ask questions if you don't, or re-state the main points in your own words to check that you're both in agreement.

Giving and receiving instructions

Here are some hints for giving and receiving verbal instructions.

For the speaker

- **Think before you speak** – work out what you want to say before you say it, and make sure you cover all of the points that are relevant.
- **Avoid jargon** – don't use words that the listener won't understand.
- **Watch for body language signals** – see if the listener looks like they understand what you're saying.
- **Ask for feedback** – check that the listener has understood the message the way you intended it.



For the listener

- **Listen to the whole message** – don't assume you know what the speaker is going to say before they say it.
- **Use positive body language** – show that you're interested in what they're saying.
- **Ask questions** – clarify any points you don't understand.
- **Give feedback** – restate in your own words what you think the speaker is saying, and check that they agree with you.

Effective listening

Effective listening is an active process. This is because listening isn't the same thing as hearing. For example, when you're working in a busy or noisy area, you may hear lots of different sounds around you – but that doesn't mean you're listening to every one of them. In fact, it's impossible for you to concentrate on all of them at once.

This is why you need to select the sounds you want to listen to. Remember, when you're the listener, you have to concentrate on what the speaker is saying.

Asking questions

One way to check that you've correctly understood a message is to ask questions. Asking questions while you're being given instructions allows you to clarify any misunderstandings or queries you may have. It also shows that you have understood what you've been told.

Here are some examples of questions you might ask when you're being given instructions:

I need you to dock some timber to length.

Do you want me to do it now, or after I finish putting this stock away?

This customer order has to go out today.

What time does it need to be ready by?

I want you to get all these deliveries ready.

Which one do you want me to do first?

These questions might sound simple, but in each case they help you both to clarify the instruction, and allow you to work together to expand on the information being communicated.

Repeating details

Repeating the details in your own words often helps you to understand an instruction better, particularly if the task you've been asked to carry out is complicated, or you haven't done it before on your own.

OK, I'll take these connectors over to Bill, and tell him the 3 terminal connector is for the input side, and the 4 terminal connector is for the output side.

This helps you to reinforce the steps in your own mind while you're still both together, so that you've each got one last opportunity to pick up on any misinterpretations before you set off to do the task.



Electronic communication

There are some forms of verbal communication where you can't see the person you're talking to, such as the two-way radio and telephone. In these instances, you need to pay particular attention to the way you express yourself, because all you have to go on are the words you use and the tone of your voice.

Here are some general hints for using electronic forms of communication to speak to others:

- Pay attention to how clear your voice sounds – make sure you use good diction, don't mumble your words, and speak into the mouthpiece at a reasonable volume.
- Try to minimise background noise – especially if you're on a mobile phone or two-way radio. If you're in a noisy area, move to a quiet location while you're on the call.
- Identify yourself at the beginning of the conversation. If you're phoning someone from outside the company, or answering an incoming call, make sure you also state the company name and maintain a friendly but businesslike manner.



In general, whenever you're speaking to someone else – either face-to-face or via the phone or radio – try to avoid making assumptions about how they're going to respond. Let the other person speak for themselves before you form an opinion on their attitude or approach to a particular issue.

Responding to questions

The way you respond to a question can have an enormous effect on the way the conversation develops between yourself and others. A poor response can make people feel angry or discouraged. A constructive response can help maintain good relations, even if the message you're giving the other person is a difficult one, or not what they'd hoped for.

A **constructive response** involves:

- being clear and concise, and staying on track with the point of the conversation
- giving the other person the chance to say their piece, and not making assumptions
- using appropriate language and ways of expressing yourself
- taking account of the other person's feelings.

Learning activity



Have a look at these two examples of a question you might ask your workmate at the end of a meeting:

Could you follow all that stuff they were going on about at the meeting?

How did you think the meeting went?

On the surface, both of these questions seem to be asking the same thing. But when you look at the underlying meaning in the first question, you can see that it comes with a built-in assumption that's likely to influence the way your workmate answers.

Below are some more questions like the ones above. See if you can pick which question has a hidden meaning in each of the pairs of questions below, and what the implied meaning is.

Example 1

What's the hold-up with the trolley – why is it taking so long?

Will you be much longer with the trolley?

Example 2

Have you got any questions?

Now that wasn't hard, you've got all that haven't you?

Example 3

I'm not sure what you mean – can you explain that?

What the hell are you on about?

Reading and writing

In the workplace, written communication is used whenever information needs to be documented. This is particularly the case when people are working to precise specifications or instructions, or when the same information is being used by different people at different times.

For example, before you carry out a task you may need to read a safe operating procedure for a machine or a job order form.

Once you've complete a task, you may be required to write up a production sheet or a quality control checklist.



And at various times throughout the day you may need to take phone messages or fill out forms relating to administrative matters.

Let's have a look at some of these examples in more detail, and discuss general tips on how to read for meaning, and write clearly and accurately.

SOP

NAIL GUN

Activity description
Covers pneumatic nail guns used for firing fasteners into timber

Potential hazards and safety controls

Hazard	Control
Eye injuries	Wear safety glasses while using and handling the gun
Hand and body injuries	Keep free hand clear of the discharge area while firing Avoid nailing into knots or unsound timber Do not skew nail or fire too close to edge of material Always remove finger from trigger when not firing Always disconnect air hose immediately after use
Noise	Wear hearing protection when using gun and handling air hose

Pre-start checks

- Safety mechanism and trigger are moving freely, and all retaining screws are secure
- Airline and fittings are in good working order, and free from tangles and leaks
- Nail cartridge is free from obstructions

Operational procedure

1. Insert nails into the magazine
2. Pull the spring-loaded feeder shoe back and allow it to click into place
3. Position the safety element against the work surface and pull the trigger to fire

Most machines and work processes have a Safe Operating Procedure (SOP) drafted for them, which sets out how to carry out the task safely and in accordance with the company's policies. Although there are many ways of writing up an SOP, they all generally follow the same layout.

The example at left shows the SOP for operating a nail gun.

You'll notice that it has an activity description, which defines the task; a list of potential hazards and safety controls; a set of pre-start checks, and a brief operational procedure.

MSDS

MSDS for MACCAS ADHESIVE	
Product description	A gunnable solvent-based adhesive for bonding wallboard and flooring materials. <i>Classification: hazardous.</i>
Acute health effects	May cause nausea, vomiting and skin and eye irritation. Inhalation may cause headaches and dizziness, eventually leading to loss of consciousness.
Chronic health effects	Repeated skin contact may cause dermatitis. Over-exposure may lead to nervous system disorders.
First aid	<i>Swallowed:</i> do not induce vomiting – give glass of water <i>Eye contact:</i> flush with water for 15 mins <i>Skin contact:</i> wash with soap and water <i>Inhaled:</i> remove person to fresh air, keep warm and at rest.
Recommended PPE	Safety glasses; Solvent resistant rubber gloves; Organic vapour respirator if ventilation is inadequate.
Precautions	Use in an open area with a cross draft.
Spills and disposal	Shut off all possible sources of ignition and evacuate the area. Contain the spill with sand, earth or vermiculite. Do not allow to run into drains or water ways.
Storage and transport	Store under cool, dry conditions, away from sources of ignition. Keep containers sealed. Keep away from acids.
Flammability	Class 3 – high flammable. Extinguish fire with carbon dioxide, dry chemical or foam extinguisher.

Another document you're likely to come across at work is a **Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS)**.

This is a summary of the procedures you should follow when using or handling a particular product, and the main health issues relating to it.

Like an SOP, there are lots of different ways of setting out an MSDS, but again, they're all standardised in terms of the information they present.

The MSDS at left is for an adhesive that comes in a cartridge.

If you're asked to use a hazardous product at work, always make sure you're aware of the MSDS information that relates to it. All companies are required to keep them on file, so you should be able to get a copy from your supervisor or safety officer.

Filling out forms

One of the things that everyone has to do from time to time is fill out a form. Forms are used to collect all sorts of information, such as:

- your personal details when you join a company
- the overtime you work, sick days you take, or holidays you request
- the day-to-day production outputs you achieve while you're at work.

The best way to approach a form is to make sure you understand its purpose, and then provide the exact information that's being asked for. Also make sure that you ask for help if you need it – it's much better to take the time to go through the questions one by one with someone who understands them, rather than make a mistake and have the form returned to you later to do again.

Here's some hints on filling out a form:

- **read through the form first**, along with any instructions, before you write anything down
- **write in block letters**, that is, capitals, if you're instructed to do so
- **cross out any mistakes you make**, rather than trying to write over the top of them.

Incident or accident form

If you suffer a workplace injury or are involved in some sort of incident, you'll probably be asked to record the details in an incident form. Generally the company's Safety Officer will help you, or even fill in the details for you.

Name of injured person: Sam Poulos	Position in company: Orderperson
Date of birth: 24 March 1976	Phone number: 9444 4444
Type of incident: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Injury <input type="checkbox"/> Damage to property <input type="checkbox"/> Near miss	Time/date: 8.45am 4/9/07
Action taken: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> First aid given <input type="checkbox"/> Sent to doctor <input type="checkbox"/> Taken to hospital <input type="checkbox"/> Reported to WorkCover	
Nature of injury, disease or damage: Cuts to left hand	
Treatment given: Antiseptic and bandage applied by first aid officer	
Cause of the incident: Sam was strapping up a pack of timber when the steel strapping flicked up and cut him on the left hand	
Corrective action recommended to prevent recurrence: Wear gloves while doing this job	
Person responsible for implementing corrective action: Jill May (Safety Officer)	
Corrective action completed: Yes	Name: Jill May Signature: J May Date: 10/9/07

The example at left shows a typical layout of an incident form used to report a workplace injury.

Telephone message

 MESSAGE	Date: 25/7/07
For: Robert	Time of call: 2 pm
Who called: Sue Simpson	Telephone no: 944 4444
From: Simpson Engineering	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Telephoned <input type="checkbox"/> Called to see you	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Wants you to phone back <input type="checkbox"/> Will phone again later	
Message: Wants to know whether the bearings have arrived yet for the moulding machine. She needs to know today. Please phone her back before 5 pm	
Message taken by: Sam	

Telephone messages are often recorded on a template-type pad bought from the local newsagent.

The advantage of using a template is that it gives you prompts so you can make sure you've written down the necessary details while the caller is still on the phone.

Toolbox meeting minutes

Name	Present	Name	Present
Derek Peters (Supervisor)	✓	Matt Cantopolous	✓
Susan Witherspoon	✓	Adam Mathews	✓
Topics discussed			
Derek said that Sam cut himself last week while strapping up a pack of timber. To stop this in future, yard workers must wear gloves from now on when using steel strapping			
Supervisor's signature	D Peters	Date	10/9/07
Follow-up / action taken			
Order placed for 6 pairs of gloves - will arrive on Friday			
Safety Officer's signature	J May	Date	12/9/07

One of the meetings you're likely to be involved in at work is a toolbox meeting.

Because they play an important role in the company's occupational health and safety system, the points raised at toolbox meetings need to be formally documented.

The example above shows a standard format for recording the minutes.

Hints on providing written information

There are lots of reasons why you might have to record workplace information, and many different types of forms or layouts used to capture it. However, there are some simple rules you can follow so that the words you use make sense to other people.

Here's a brief checklist for providing written information at work:

1. **Make sure you understand the purpose** of the document you're writing or the form you're filling out. This will help you to provide the exact information needed, so that you don't leave out important points or add other details that aren't necessary.
2. **Use simple language.** Choose words carefully, and don't use too many formal words or long-winded phrases.
3. **Make your sentences short and clear.** Complex sentences are more difficult to read, and can often hide information. Remember, a single sentence should contain only one idea. If you need to, you can separate the components of an idea with dot points or a numbered list.
4. Before you finish the job, always **take the time to proof read what you've written**, just to make sure it makes sense.
5. If the message is very important, it's also a good idea to **ask someone else to read it**, and mark any words or phrases that they think aren't clear.

Learning activity



When you communicate in writing, the words you use are all important. Unlike talking to someone, there's no way of checking on the spot that the message is being received the way you'd intended it.

This means that by the time you do get feedback on your message, the reader will have already formed an opinion on it, and may have also put plans into action on the basis of what they thought you were saying.

So it's vital that when you read back over what you've written, you look at it from the reader's perspective – bearing in mind that they may not have all the background information or experience that you have on the matter. This is one of the reasons why it's helpful to have someone else proof read important documents before you submit them, just to make sure that you've included all the information you should have.

One of the things you need to look out for is **ambiguous sentences** – that is, sentences that might have more than one meaning. This can happen when you use words with double-meanings, or put phrases in the wrong place in a sentence.

Below are some examples of ambiguous sentences. See if you can identify the double-meaning in each one, and then rephrase it to make the meaning clearer.

Tomorrow we plan to remove everyone from the premises and have them fumigated.

We had Jacko Strezleckie for lunch yesterday.

The forklift overturned and the forklift driver was trapped. The doctor arrived a few minutes later and had to perform an emergency operation on the forklift truck.

Body language

Body language is a form of non-verbal communication. It includes all of the ways people express themselves through their gestures, facial expressions and body poses.

Some aspects of body language can be carefully managed, such as the way you might nod and maintain eye contact to look interested in what someone is saying.

But other aspects are almost impossible to control, such as your facial expression when you're shocked, or your general posture when you're feeling down. So even though you may not be aware of it at the time, the non-verbal signals you display are very powerful communicators of the way you feel at any given moment.



It's worthwhile being aware of your own body language, particularly if you want to convey a particular attitude. For example, if you were going for a job interview and wanted to show you were keen to get the position, the non-verbal signals that would help to convey this message would include:



- smiling to indicate friendliness
- leaning forward to indicate interest
- maintaining eye contact to show openness and attentiveness
- nodding to show you understand.

But remember, don't try to overly 'manage' your actions. You don't want to give the impression that you're being false or untrustworthy.

Learning activity



Some facial expressions are considered to be universal, found in every ethnic group and social class around the world. In everyday life, these expressions are largely spontaneous and therefore generally outside of your conscious control.

Have a look at the facial expressions of the actors shown below. See if you can describe in a single word what basic emotion each one is portraying. Then ask another person to look at the same pictures and find a single word to describe the emotions. How close are your interpretations?



Signs and hand signals

There are some instances when the best way to transmit information is to do it visually. This may be because the workplace is noisy or there is some distance between the people communicating. Or it could be because there are general risks in an area, requiring everyone entering it to take precautions.

The simplest way to get information across under these conditions is to use workplace signs or hand signals.

Safety signs

Most safety signs use standard colours and conventional symbols. Here's some examples.



Signs with a red circle and diagonal bar through the centre are called **prohibition** signs, meaning 'not permitted'.



A red circle specifies a **restriction**. This sign says that the speed limit is 5 kilometres per hour.



A blue circular background indicates a **mandatory**, or 'must do' sign. This sign is telling you to wear a hard hat.



A yellow triangle means **warning**. In this case, the sign is saying 'keep clear'.



Danger signs are used to refer to life threatening hazards. This sign would be put over the entranceway to a confined space.



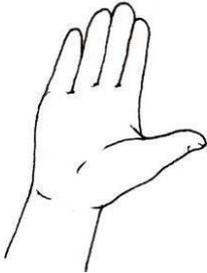
A green rectangular background is used for **emergency** information. The most common example is an 'exit' sign.



A red rectangular background is used for information about **fire** services. This sign indicates that a fire extinguisher is nearby.

Hand signals

Workers in a team often develop their own hand signals to convey particular instructions or directions. However, there are some general hand signal conventions that are used everywhere, particularly in crane and dogging operations. Below are some typical examples.



The most universally understood hand signal is **stop**.

Hold your hand head-high, with your palm towards the person you're signalling. As with all signals, make sure your actions are big and obvious. Don't use half-hearted movements.



To indicate to a driver to **raise a load**, use your index finger to point up, with the rest of your hand closed. Move your whole hand up to make the direction obvious.



To **lower a load**, point down, moving your whole hand down at the same time.



To indicate **go left** or **go right**, point in that direction and move your whole hand in a sweeping action in the same direction. Again, use strong decisive actions to signal your directions.

Learning activity

Below are some common workplace signs. See if you can guess their meanings.



Workplace meetings

There's a variety of meetings you might be asked to attend at work. These could include:

- Toolbox meetings
- Production meetings
- Safety committee meetings
- Site meetings
- Social club meetings.



There might also be times when you need to organise your own meetings, such as with suppliers, clients, or other employees.

The way a meeting is conducted depends on the type of meeting it is and the objectives you hope to achieve from it. For example, a safety committee meeting will have a chairman, a formal agenda and a person taking the minutes of what's being said. On the other hand, a meeting with a supplier may simply involve a brief discussion and verbal agreement on the outcomes.

Nonetheless, whatever their purpose, all meetings that run well and achieve their objectives have several basic characteristics in common. These are as follows.

Characteristics of effective meetings

Time management

All effective meetings have good time management. This includes having definite starting and finishing times, so people aren't made to wait at the beginning, and aren't kept back late at the end. It also includes using an agenda to structure the meeting, so that all of the items that need to be discussed can be dealt with in the time allowed.

Active listening

Effective meetings require active listening from all members. In a team meeting, this includes:

- concentrating on what other people are saying
- looking at the person who's talking
- giving feedback, and asking questions about things you don't understand.

Open negotiation

Effective meetings allow people to negotiate with each other – that is, air their own views and have differences of opinion discussed openly. In the end everyone should feel they've been given a fair hearing and be prepared to accept the final decision.

One method of resolving a difficult issue is to use the **four step model** of open negotiation:

1. **Preparation** – think about exactly what the problem is, and how you plan to overcome it
2. **Group discussion** – allow everyone to express their ideas and opinions
3. **Proposal** – offer a solution that you think will be acceptable to everyone
4. **Bargain** – if there are differences of opinion, find a compromise that everyone is happy with.

Low levels of stress and conflict

Participants in effective meetings tend to have low levels of stress and conflict. This doesn't mean no stress or conflict – sometimes a little bit is unavoidable, especially if you're discussing something that people feel strongly about. But a high level of stress doesn't help when you're trying to resolve a difficult issue.

Here's some hints on how to work through a problem that's proving hard to resolve.

1. Make sure you have a **clear understanding** of all the issues before you begin.
2. **Communicate freely** with the other members; don't hold back grievances that might resurface later.
3. **Don't confront** others unexpectedly; let them prepare for the discussion as well.
4. **Don't attack** other members about irrelevant or personal things; keep to the issues.
5. Make sure that everyone has the **chance to fully state their case**.
6. **Come to an agreement** about what the basic problems are.
7. Once you're in agreement about the issues, **use the open negotiation steps** to work towards a resolution.

Quality of decisions

The effectiveness of a meeting is judged by the quality of the decisions that come out of it. Good decisions are down-to-earth decisions that people are prepared to put into practice once they get back to work.

It's important to note, though, that one of the problems with group decisions is that sometimes people can talk each other into a more extreme position than they would have taken by

themselves. That is, a 'group-think' mentality takes over, where everyone starts to lose their common-sense and goes along with whatever the group seems to be saying. A good way of avoiding this is to use the 'if-then' approach to test the decisions the group is making. This means asking:

If we do this, then what will happen?

The 'if-then' test lets you check whether the ideas that the group is coming up with are going to work back on the job.

Active participation

Effective meetings have the active participation of all members. But remember, for the meeting to be productive the participation must be positive and constructive. Sometimes people make negative contributions that can have a damaging effect on the mood of a meeting, or stop people from cooperating with each other.

Learning activity



Let's have a look at some of the ways people actively participate in meetings, and see what sort of effect they're likely to have.

Decide whether each of the actions described below is likely to have a positive or negative effect on the meeting. Write 'P' for positive or 'N' for negative beside each action.

- Adding your voice to the discussion, even if you don't think that everyone will agree with you.
- Being aggressive or hostile towards others.
- Allowing others to add their voice, even if you don't fully agree with them.
- Listening closely to other members, and taking an interest in what they have to say.
- Dominating the discussion, and not letting others say their piece.
- Helping with follow-ups and other activities that arise out of the decisions made.
- Being sarcastic, or not taking the meeting seriously.
- Withdrawing from the discussion, letting others do all the work.

Why do you think it is so important for members to encourage positive contributions and to discourage negative input?

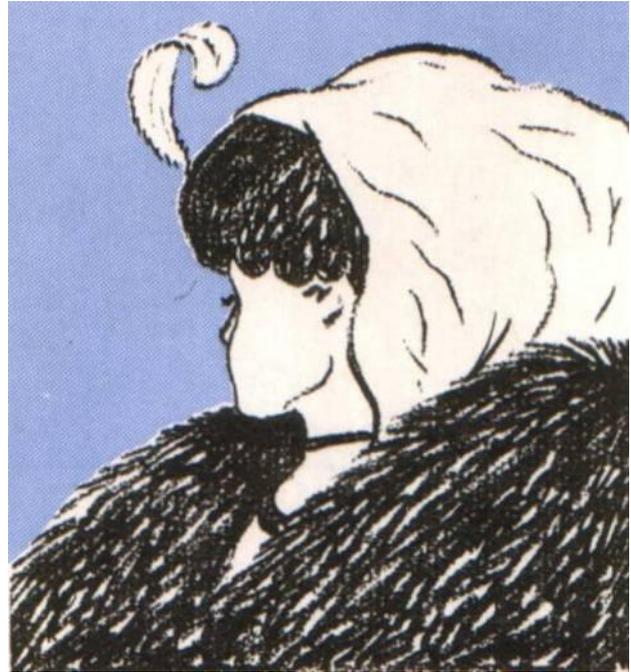
In conclusion

When you're communicating with others, you have to bear in mind that different people sometimes see things in different ways. So you need to constantly remind yourself that the message you *think* you're conveying may not be the same as the message that's received.

Just to illustrate the point, have a close look at the drawing on the right. Is this woman young and beautiful, or old and ugly?

If you can only see one of the images – keep looking – you're about to get a surprise.

Once you've found both, take a moment to switch back and forth between them. See how completely different each one is, but also how obvious they both are once you know what to look for.



Communication is like that. When you're with people who know where you're coming from, it's easy, and just comes naturally. But when you're in a situation where you can't make sense of what the other person's saying, or why they're reacting the way they are, you need to be able to take a step back and say:

What does this look like from their point of view?

To be able to see the issues from the perspective of others is a huge asset. It doesn't mean you have to agree with them, but it does help you to see where the misunderstandings are. It also allows you both to explain your positions more fully.

This is what good communication is all about – getting the message across so that both parties can see its meaning in the same way.